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A/N: This story takes place immediately after the Deathly Hallows epilogue, and it is compliant. It is also an H/Hr story though, about their subtly deteriorating home lives and the quest for authenticity with each other. It will eventually be rated M for sex and language. Hope you enjoy this first taste!

Unlike a Sister

Prologue: Words for Hugo

Harry stepped away from the platform. The steam was still rising from the tracks, obscuring the train in the distance. With a heavy heart that surprised even himself, he turned and looked at the remainder of his family. With his two boys gone, his eyes fell on his small, scarlet haired daughter holding onto his wife's hand.

Lily was crying piteously and Ginny was stroking the nine-year-old's hair. Ginny's eyes, however, were impatient and focused on Harry.

"Harry," she called. "We should head back. I still need to write up that report on the Cannons' game yesterday. Any later and the Pitch will have it before the Prophet..."

Harry nodded. He cast a glance over his shoulder. The train was nowhere in sight. He started to move with the rest of the parents towards the exit of Platform 9¾. Just up ahead, he thought he spied the silhouette of a handsome, gangly man with his arm around a slight woman with slumped shoulders. The woman was holding the hand of a small boy stumbling over his own steps. It was undoubtedly his best friends Ron and Hermione with their son Hugo. Like Lily, Hugo was still two years away from riding the red steam engine to Hogwarts themselves. Without question, both couples would be dealing with an inconsolable youngest child on the car ride home.

Harry thought of calling out to them, but the crush of parents and children had separated them and Ginny was saying something.

"You'll have to fix supper tonight for Lily. I've got to stop by the office. I forgot I left the game stats there. All this preparing the kids for their

send-off has made me so forgetful..." Ginny said as she fumbled in her bag with one hand and held on to Lily with the other.

Lily's freckled face was blotched, her nose a shiny pink. Harry moved to her other side and took her hand.

"That's fine," he said to Ginny. "Should I cook for you too, or just Lily?"

"Just Lily. I might as well write the report there with some peace and quiet," she said as she pushed her way between two slow-moving couples, dragging Lily and consequently Harry in her wake.

Harry nodded behind her head. He wanted to say it might be best for both of Lily's parents to be present tonight. After all, Lily had just been made a de facto only child. Harry didn't want to have to deal with the ramifications by himself. By the time his mind shifted to what meal would make Lily the happiest, they were at the entrance back into King's Cross. He held Lily's hand more tightly and stepped through the portal.

As Harry opened his car door, he heard someone shout his name. "Oi, Harry!"

As he turned, he saw a shock of orange hair moving towards him between the parked cars. It was Ron followed closely by Hermione and Hugo.

"I'm parked just over there," said Ron, pointing to the far end of the parking lot.

Harry could just make out their blue Audi coupe in the distance. It had been Hermione's choice to buy that car. Ron had preferred something slightly more garish, the latest generation Hummer to be exact, since he thought it would be hilarious to drive that monstrosity down the narrow alleys of London—not to mention the obvious magical flourishes it would take to park the car. Harry much preferred Hermione's choice.

"Ron!" Ginny called, smiling as Ron reached her. The two embraced. "How are you going to deal without little Rose in the house?"

"We'll manage," Ron smiled a bit sadly as Hermione sidled up to him. Harry glanced at Hermione's face. Her eyes were clearly bloodshot, but she was smiling as well. Lily gave a pathetic whine from the backseat of Harry's car, a gleaming black Mitsubishi.

"Well, you'll be over for dinner on Wednesday?" Harry asked, turning to Ron.

Wednesday was usually the day Harry took off early from the Auror Department in the Ministry. He usually spent the day down at the Auror training facility, supervising the training of new recruits. That usually left him free by lunch time, and he'd visit Ron at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes before heading to either his or Ron's house for dinner.

"Yes, of course," Hermione replied. "I think it's yours and Ginny's turn to host?"

"Right," said Ginny.

"Okay, we'll see you then," said Harry. He turned to Ron, who was closest to him, and clasped his hand.

Then, Harry noticed Hugo holding on to Ron's trouser leg. The boy's look of utter dejection was almost comical and Harry felt the desire to comfort him.

Kneeling down as he had with Albus only moments before, he came face to face with the small boy—a perfect mixture of his two best friends.

"Hey, cheer why don't you?" Harry said with a smile. "The year is going to fly by, and Rose will be back in no time. Just focus on acing all your classes so you'll be ready when you do go to Hogwarts."

"I hate my classes!" Hugo muttered.

Above them, Harry heard Ron chuckle and Hermione hiss.

"Well, math and reading are important too. You can't do anything as a wizard without that," said Harry reasonably.

He could understand why Hugo found all his classes boring. Magical children under the age of eleven were not allowed to own a wand. Thus, Hugo and Lily went to the same wizarding preparatory school in central London, where they learned the Muggle basics of math, reading, and writing. Necessary skills, but understandably boring in comparison to the Hogwarts curriculum.

"Yeah, Hugo," said Ron from above Harry. "At least you're not a Muggle. That's all you'd be doing the rest of your life."

"Hey," said Hermione softly. "That's not so horrible..." She was teasing.

Harry smiled and turned back to Hugo. "Well, you'll be at Hogwarts soon enough. When you come over Wednesday, bring your Firebolt and we'll fly around at my house. How'd you like that?"

Hugo beamed widely and blinked a few times. The kid was still a bit star struck around Harry. "Sure Uncle Harry!"

"All right, all right," said Hermione. "That'll be after you finish your schoolwork and I look it over."

"Now tell Uncle Harry goodbye, Hugo," said Ginny. "I've really got to get going. My Chudley report..."

"Ugh, why report on that?" said Ron, disgusted. The Chudley's had lost their last four games, ruining an unprecedentedly good season for Ron's favorite team. While he and Ginny were briefly wrapped up in Quidditch talk, Harry kissed Hugo on the forehead and stood up.

Hermione was smiling at him.

"All right," Harry said to her. "See you Wednesday night then, if not at the office on Monday."

"Right. I imagine I'll have to stop by the AD sometime on Monday. The whole Callahan situation is getting sort of serious. So keep an owl out."

"I will. Maybe we can grab lunch. It's sort of a touchy subject at the office, understandably."

Ginny and Ron's conversation was quieting.

"Okay well, goodbye," said Hermione. She leaned in and kissed Harry's cheek. As Harry brushed his lips by her ear, he heard Hermione say "thanks."

It was so soft, only Harry heard it. She squeezed his elbow before turning away.

"Harry, c'mon!" Ginny called, moving to the other side of the car.

Harry watched Hermione and Ron disappear and moved to open his own car door. As he turned the keys in the ignition, he heard Lily cry out again in the back seat.

"I'm all alooooone," she sniffled.

Harry turned to Ginny. She rolled her eyes.

"No you're not, sweetie. We're here," Harry said.

With that, Harry moved his car out into the rush of traffic, using a little magic to get past the red light.

Chapter 1: Wine in the Library

Ginny had disappeared over two hours ago. Harry didn't expect her back until late that night. Ginny usually took a great deal of care with her articles, it was the reason she was one of the best sports writers in wizarding England. The Prophet's sports section had been a joke when she got there. Now, her work was largely the reason the Prophet had become the new standard in sports reporting. However, her talents also meant that Harry would be eating alone with a very distraught Lily tonight.

The moment Harry parked the car at the house, Lily had jumped out of her seat and ran inside. She was now locked inside Albus' room, most likely crying on top of his bedspread and taking in the last few whiffs of her brother's scent on the sheets. Lily was somewhat closer to James in temperament than Albus, but Lily still loved her middle brother dearly.

Harry wasn't too worried about her, though. He could hear her moving around up stairs. At one point, he was sure he heard bouncing bed springs, meaning that Lily wasn't so depressed as to resist jumping on her brother's bed.

It was early into a Saturday evening now. Harry had settled into his chair at the kitchen table, occasionally bringing a cup of coffee to his lips. He had pulled some files out of his attaché to look over before he started cooking dinner. He was distracted, however.

His heart felt hollow. Both of his boys were gone. He loved Lily with his whole person, but Albus was particularly special to Harry. For one, the boy looked like him and had the same unassuming and humble nature. James, on the other hand, resembled Harry's late father in more than just his name. He was confident and boisterous, and apparently had already been involved with a number of girls at Hogwarts. He had bright, brown eyes that were actually quite captivating—as if he was plotting something deliciously mischievous.

If James resembled his namesake in countenance and composure, Lily was a mixture of both Harry and Ginny. Her hair was a deep red, her eyes a soft gray. She still had a slight lisp, which made her somewhat hesitant among strangers. Yet, she was like her mother – bold and demanding, never afraid to voice her opinion among her

family members. Like her father later in life, she was cautious to make judgments and detested extreme opinions.

As for Albus, what could Harry say? He saw himself in his middle child. The boy was scrawny, with the same shock of jet-black hair and bottle-green eyes of his father. Of all his children, and Harry hated to rank them, he knew that Albus was the most intelligent. He resembled Hermione in the rapidity of his thoughts, but had the sense not to be annoying about his breadth of knowledge. Since he was five, Albus had devoured books with abandon. And he was non-discriminating when it came to literature—fiction and non-fiction, wizard and Muggle classics, news and Quidditch magazines. Harry was sure Albus would excel far beyond anything Harry had ever accomplished at Hogwarts...

The word "Hogwarts" brought him back to recent events. He glanced at his wristwatch—half past seven. He was sure the students would be seating themselves in the Great Hall now. Maybe Albus and Rose were standing in the anteroom of Great Hall, deathly afraid about marching in front of their peers to be Sorted. James would be among his posse of friends at the Gryffindor table, waiting to catch a glimpse of his brother and whisper some wisecrack. Deep down, Harry knew that James would be praying Albus ended up in Gryffindor...

Harry took another sip of coffee. He looked at the untouched files before him and sighed.

Might as well get to it then. Harry heaved himself to his feet and walked towards the refrigerator. He sighed again at its near-empty state. He pulled out a catalog of Witch's Brew and summoned four chicken breasts, some tomato paste, and angel hair pasta.

He siphoned the pasta into a bowl with his wand and placed it over the stove.

"Incendio," Harry toned and a fire ignited beneath the pot.

Next, the tomato paste went flying into a smaller pot, and Harry lit a weaker flame beneath the sauce. As he was dashing the chicken with pepper and spice rub, there was a small 'pop' behind him.

He turned on a pin, startled. Hermione and Hugo stood before him.

"Oh, hello!" Harry cried.

"Hi, Harry. I'm so sorry to bother you and Ginny. Hugo here was pretty insistent on seeing Lily. I think he doesn't want to be stuck with me at home," Hermione smiled.

Harry looked down at Hugo. The boy still looked depressed, and Harry took pity on him. Lily had dealt with the separation of one brother before, but Hugo was new to the departure of a sibling.

"Well, you can try Hugo. Lily's locked herself in Albus' room, but maybe if you ask real nice, she'll let you in?"

"Okay, Uncle Harry!"

With that, Hugo pulled his hand out of Hermione's and dashed up the grand staircase in the direction of Albus' room.

Harry turned to Hermione. "I'm actually really glad you're here. Ginny's writing that damn article at the office. I was hoping she'd be here to talk to Lily—she's always better at that stuff than me."

"Having Hugo here should help," Hermione said simply. "Cooking?"

"Yeah, just chicken and pasta," Harry said, turning back to the stove. "You and Hugo want to stay for dinner? I bought enough chicken and I can summon some more pasta."

"Ginny is coming for dinner?" Hermione asked.

"She said she wouldn't. I don't blame her. The Prophet keeps the sports office stocked with all sorts of junk food...the hours those guys have!" Harry said as he shot a stream of water into the sauce.

Hermione laughed behind him. He could hear her pull out a chair at the table.

"We really aren't the sort of people who should talk about hours, Harry. Before you became head of the AD, Ginny always complained you were never around. You still have insane hours, come to think of it."

"That's true," Harry said as he placed the chicken in another pan full of butter, onions, and mushrooms. "I could say the same about you. Don't know how many times I've left the office at eleven and seen your office light still on...You'd think after all this time, we'd want some time off."

Hermione chuckled again. "I'm a workaholic. What's your excuse?"

"Habit? I don't know," Harry sighed as he flipped the chicken. An enchanted spoon was slowly turning the pasta sauce in a clockwise direction. "I keep looking around this place and see so much I want to redo, you know? The carpet in James' room is filthy. Lily's room is too small by half. Ginny's and my room could use a repainting. And the library downstairs needs to be organized, re-shelved, refurbished...re-everything!"

"With that, I'm happy to help!" Hermione smiled. "Look at you, Mr. Fix-It. I didn't know this stuff was bothering you. You know I think your house is gorgeous. With twenty-three rooms, you can't expect to maintain all of them. You could hire some people to spruce things up?"

Harry extinguished the flames on the stove. "Yeah...no. There's too much sensitive material in this house. Maybe that's just my paranoia talking, but having strange wizards poke around my house doesn't set well with me."

Hermione nodded, "No, I get it. Maybe before Christmas we can make a project of it or something. You, me, Ginny, and Ron—it'd be like the old days in Grimmauld Place."

"Ooh," Harry hissed. "Yeah, that's when I know this place is falling apart. When you compare it to Grimmauld Place!"

Hermione's laugh rang out again. "You know that's not what I meant..."

Harry chuckled to himself. The utensils were busying themselves, arranging themselves on the table.

Harry turned to Hermione. "I'm sorry—did you say you and Hugo were eating with us? What about Ron?"

"Sure, we can eat here. Ron's at home watching the Harpies game, so I doubt I can pull him away," Hermione sighed. "Since we're talking re-modeling, he'd likely suggest you upgrade your entertainment room with one of the new Wall-Projected Magic-Vision screens. Until you do that, he won't be coming over during game time."

Harry chuckled to himself. Regrettably, he'd fallen miserably behind this Quidditch season. Work never seemed to give him a free moment to fully enjoy something as simple as a Quidditch game these days. He envied Ron for that a bit.

"That is a great set-up you got though, at your house," Harry started.

Hermione made a retching noise. "Ugh, please. That thing drives me up the wall. It's huge, loud, and an eyesore. Thank God you don't have one in your house...how does Ginny feel about that?"

"Well, whenever a game is on," Harry said, as he spooned pasta onto the four plates on the table, "she usually goes down to the Prophet to watch it. They basically have Ron's set-up on steroids. Screen takes up the entire wall, self-immersion magical technology, and running stats on the bottom."

"Sounds great," said Hermione, drawing out the word.

Harry smiled, slipping the chicken cutlet onto the last plate. He patted Hermione's head as he passed her. "Poor you, you really picked the wrong group of friends didn't you?"

"Ha! More like I picked the wrong country. Only England is this Quidditch-obsessed. If this was the U.S., for instance, I'd just have to watch Stratagenesis all the time..."

"Mmm, maybe. But they're just as obsessed about that as we are about Quidditch. Like Muggle, like wizard."

Hermione smiled widely at that. The phrase had become a slogan in the days after Voldemort. "Like Muggle, like wizard."

Part of Harry's efforts in the AD had been to end Muggle stereotypes in the mass wizarding media, which included awareness campaigns, conducted by several prominent Muggle-borns (including Hermione)

to increase wizard familiarity about Muggle customs. The overarching message of campaign was to hammer home the similarities of Muggles and wizards. Hermione had also been instrumental in the formation of a new Ministry department, the Department of Wizard and Muggle Exchange, which offered a few scholarships to Muggles and wizards alike to trade places and experience life on the other side. So far, there had been no need to Oblivate any Muggles, as all of them have kept their promises to keep the existence of wizards a secret. There was long-term talk of the eventual integration of both communities.

"Shall I call the kids?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded as she walked towards the refrigerator to take out some mango juice, Lily's favorite. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry's patronus, a silver stag, dart up the staircase towards Albus' room.

Hermione giggled. "That's always caught me off guard."

Harry smiled bemusedly.

"You know, that you use a patronus to call your kids to supper? That's when you know your house is too big," Hermione explained.

"Oh, I guess you're right," Harry stammered, passing a hand through his hair. "I figure it's less startling than apparating in their mid...."

The light patter of feet flying down the staircase, just visible from the eating area in the kitchen, cut off his words.

"SPAGHETTI!" Lily exclaimed. A breathless and giddy Hugo was just behind her.

"Yes, yes—wash your hands first, darling." Harry said.

Lily moved towards the sink. "Daddy!"

Harry swished and flicked his wand and Lily rose in the air by several inches so she could reach the taps. Harry directed her safely to the ground again with his wand.

Harry looked to Hermione and saw that she was waving her wand above Hugo's hands as a stream of ice blue water dangled below her wand. Hugo stuck his hands in the glob and began scrubbing his palms.

"Well, what's this now?" Harry asked, surprised.

"It's a new spell," Hermione explained. "I've been using it with the kids at the park recently. I just combined a simple water spell, a sanitation charm, and plasticity element together, and voila. No muss, no fuss, and clean hands."

Harry raised an eyebrow. This wasn't the first time Hermione had "invented" a spell. She'd been doing it a lot since she left Hogwarts. Technically, spell creation was a licensed and registered affair at the Ministry, but in this matter Hermione didn't follow the regulations. When it came to her kids, she was pretty laissez-faire.

"Right. Well, teach it to me later."

Thankfully, dinner progressed without one mention of the missing siblings. Hugo and Lily were absorbed in conversation about their classes and other meaningless drabble, at least to Harry's ears. His food was complimented. Hermione moaned a few times about how Ron had never mustered the energy to make anything this good. When the kids had cleaned up their plates, it was nearly nine and time for bed.

Harry was a loving, but somewhat strict, father. He had both Lily and Hugo clean their plates with soap and water, when a simple Scourgify spell from him or Hermione would have worked just as well. It wasn't that he didn't want to help them in their task, but he reckoned understanding the menial way of doing things was important. Soon, they would have the use of magic, and things would become all too easy. It was one of the biggest problems he faced in communicating to wizards the difficulty of Muggle life. If he couldn't teach his own kids how to manage without a wand, how could he expect the entire wizarding world to respect Muggles? In any case, none of his children had put up much of a fight. Hugo looked a bit warily at the sponge when it was his turn to wash his dishes, but Harry was largely infallible in Hugo's eyes. Washing his own plate wouldn't change that.

"Daddy? Story tonight?" Lily asked, pulling at Harry's hand as he magicked the plates back into the cupboard.

"Uh, sure honey," Harry answered. "Why don't you go pick one out and I'll be up in a little bit?"

Before Lily could leave the kitchen, however, Hugo had turned to Hermione and asked, "Mum, can I hear the story too? I like it when Uncle Harry reads the stories."

Hermione looked to Harry, and Harry smiled, letting her know it was okay.

"Sure, go upstairs with Lily and we'll be up in a few minutes," Hermione replied, smiling.

The two children scampered upstairs, leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

"Thanks for that," Hermione said. "I think it's good for the kids if they don't dwell on the others leaving. Hugo was uncharacteristically quiet when we got home. Being around Lily seems to help."

"I know what you mean," said Harry as he rinsed his hands in the sink. "I think Lily was crying for a good half hour in Albus' room. Though, I'm not especially worried. Albus is great at writing letters—it'll be a good opportunity for those two to build up a correspondence."

As Harry dried his hands, Hermione moved towards him. "I agree," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder and sliding it down to his hand. "I...Albus is so like you...I was wondering, are you okay...with his leaving?"

Harry was startled. He looked at her quickly; her eyes were soft behind thick lashes.

"I—" Harry began.

"Daddy!" A high-pitched squeal reached their ears.

"Coming sweetheart!" Harry shouted, and the two made their way towards the stairs.

Lily had picked one of Hermione's favorites, Peter Pan. It was one of the many Muggle classics littered around Lily's small pink room. This book, however, was a wizarding edition of J.M. Barrie's story, meaning that Peter and Wendy literally flew out of the window on page eight, and Hook dramatically fell into the belly of the crocodile by the end of the story.

Despite the smallish proportions of Lily's room, her bed was roomy. Since they had known each other for years, Hugo and Lily had no qualms about snuggling together on the bed, holding the book between them as Harry stretched out next to Hugo and read. Nestling Lily against her chest, Hermione leaned back against the headboard. She slowly braided Lily's hair as Harry read.

Harry was about to reenact the rousing cheer of the Lost Boys upon the death of Hook when Hermione reached over and patted him on the arm. Hugo and Lily were already sleeping, Hugo's grip loosening around the book's spine. Harry instantly hushed his voice as Hermione gently pulled Lily off her chest and lowered her to the bed.

Harry returned Peter Pan to Lily's small, white bookshelf and followed Hermione out into the hallway.

Again, Harry ran a distracted hand through his hair. "We can leave them there for a bit. Would you like a glass of wine before you leave?"

Hermione sighed, looking down the hallway. "If I was smart, I would head home now and get to work on that Callahan brief. Ron probably wants dinner, if he hasn't made something for himself already—most likely deep-fried Sherbet balls," she smiled.

"I know what you mean," said Harry, looking down as he dug his shoe into the carpet. "I'm supposed to be looking over the quarterly review. They need my comments on Tuesday—haven't read a page."

Hermione smiled at him, but started heading down the hallway towards the main landing above the grand staircase. The lights were dimming magically. "Well, we are past the days when I could have covered for you," she said with a light laugh.

Harry was smiling as he followed behind her. She stopped abruptly at the top of the stairs and turned to Harry. "I'm up for a glass of wine."

Harry nodded. "All right. Red or white?"

"Red."

"I think I've got a Malbec and a red Riesling in the kitchen. What do you prefer?" Harry asked, descending the stairway slowly.

"Malbec, you?"

"Same."

Hermione settled herself in the library as Harry poured the wine into two stem-less glasses. Carrying them into the dimly lit room, he saw Hermione curled up on the antique *récamier*. He handed her a glass and seated himself in the leather armchair he usually reserved for pleasure reading.

"I love your collection," Hermione said, gazing at the books the lined the spacious room as Harry kicked off his shoes and placed them on the ottoman.

Harry chuckled. "I know. But, you know I mostly have Sirius to thank for that."

"Yeah..." Hermione agreed. "You lucky bastard. You inherit all this great shit and don't even bother to care for it," she teased.

"I do bother!" Harry cried, indignant. "I just, you know, never have the time. Neither does Ginny—in any case, she sort of sticks to the modern parts of the house—the exercise room, the kids' rooms, the entertainment room."

"Yeah, I guess I can't blame you. The two of you are exceptionally busy...I guess we all are."

Harry smiled, remembering something he had overheard in the AD the other day. "Yeah, especially you! I heard you were up for a promotion? Hermione Jean Granger. Made partner in two years. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in four?"

Hermione giggled. "I can assure you that's a scurrilous lie."

"Well, what's the truth?"

Harry thought he saw Hermione uncharacteristically blush. "I don't know the truth. I can say that John Lakey has approached me about making me Deputy of the department. I told him I would have to think about it."

Harry stared. "Wow, Hermione. That's a great honor. Guess they've finally tacked on to what a genius you are."

Hermione seemed to glow slightly redder. "Great wine by the way!"

Harry chuckled. "Don't try and cover up your pleasure, Hermione darling. I know you love the compliments."

Hermione laughed in turn. "Well, I certainly won't turn them down from you, Harry. But in all seriousness...I haven't made up my mind about it. There's Hugo to consider. I'm already afraid I'll become a non-presence in his life, and can I stand to become even more burdened before he leaves me for Hogwarts..."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"I know," Harry replied slowly. "I feel the same about James. About Albus."

The mention of Albus' name triggered the previous interrupted conversation in Hermione's mind. "You didn't answer me before...about how you're taking his leaving?" Hermione broached carefully.

Harry swilled his wine for a moment, a deep red orb in his hand. "I...I feel like I understand Albus, through and through. He is me, to some extent—a me if I had a completely different childhood."

Hermione nodded. She had noted the startling similarities as well, not just in appearance, but in character. Albus was strong-willed and stubborn like Harry, but he was also sacrificial and possessive of his siblings. He had the same unassuming politeness and gentility as Harry, even at eleven.

"I feel like I know him. But just recently I began to think, what if he doesn't know me?"

"What do you mean?" Hermione questioned, sitting up slightly.

Harry had his elbows resting on both knees, his wine glass cupped in between his hands. "Well, you mentioned it before. Ginny said I was never around when they were little. I was still making my way at the AD. You remember, for a while we thought Voldemort's former supporters would form an insurgency. I was never at home, and to be honest—I didn't want to be at home. I was addicted to the adrenaline in those days; I didn't want it all to be over.

"I think I was finally jolted out of it when I saw James for the first time. He was eight weeks old, and the instant Ginny put him in my arms he started crying. And he literally would not stop. I know you can't put much store in what a baby does, but I felt absolutely horrible." After a moment, Harry chuckled. "I think Ginny wanted me to feel that horrible. I deserved it, after all."

Harry grew quiet, so Hermione ventured a response. "But, things got better once you were made Head..."

"I know. Things were better, but still we had those crazy hours. Some days, I would come home just as the children were eating breakfast. They were so wonderful, kissing and hugging me like I was back from a war, and not the office. Ginny told them I was working very hard for them.

"But, I came to realize...they're first education of who their father was didn't come from me. It came from kids in nursery school who looked up when they heard their last names. When I made it school functions, I'm sure they noticed how all the teachers and other parents treated me differently, you know? The only normal people were you and Ron."

Harry took in a slow breath and looked up. He seemed unchanged, perhaps only somewhat bereaved. His face was red, but that was probably from the wine. "So," Harry continued, "all the kids had different ways of dealing with that. James loved to play up the famous Harry Potter stuff. When he was six, he had me reenact the

final battle with Voldemort, as he couldn't quite visualize how Expelliarmus could defeat the greatest dark wizard of all time.

"Lily loves the daddy aspect of me. She doesn't really care what I do or where I work, as long as I do "daddy" things with her—read her stories, buy her toys, push her on the swing. And then there's Albus..."

Hermione stared, transfixed, as Harry heaved another enormous sigh. It seemed to rattle through his whole body, shaking his hands. He looked up at Hermione again, this time smiling. "You're going to think this is odd, but I really think I named Albus well. He has these piercing eyes, just like Dumbledore's. I feel like they go right through me. Even at a young age, I felt like Albus understood the famous version of me and the daddy version. So all he was trying to do was figure out what I really was. It's my own fault that I was never around enough for him to really figure it out...and now he's at Hogwarts."

Harry spit out the last word like a curse. Hermione was startled. Was that the first time she had ever heard him refer to Hogwarts without a loving caress in his voice?

Hermione wasn't entirely sure if Harry needed comforting. From what she knew of Harry, his children were always constant concerns—she never guessed that they were causing him this sort of psychological worry.

Hermione got to her feet and padded over to Harry. She sat down on the ottoman before him and pulled his hands away from his face. He looked exceedingly tired.

"Harry, darling," she said kindly, "You are an exceptional father. Your children adore you not simply because you are famous but because you are theirs. They have their whole lives to know you—you simply can't despair that they never will know you. You have raised them to be wonderful children, and you should be proud of that!" she chided softly, trying to meet his gaze.

He didn't seem to want to look at her. Hermione's hands slipped to his knees. He remained silent, so Hermione tried a different tack. "Harry, I've felt the same way about Rose and Hugo. Rose is so brilliant, people always say "just like me." But she has always much preferred Ron. Hugo is a darling, but I know he doesn't quite

understand his mother. Maybe it's not for children to know their parents at—"

Harry was shaking you head. "I'm sorry, Hermione. It's not the same," he said, smiling ruefully. "Have you forgotten I've been to your house hundreds of times? You care for them so well because you're so on top of everything. You have things under control. You excel at parenting, just like you've excelled at everything. I don't begin to match up."

Hermione let out an undignified scoff. "Please, Harry," she said, patting his knee. "I am so far from having things 'under control.'"

Harry seemed to give a genuine smile, at least a smile that made the corners of his eyes crinkle. He lightly touched her hair again, this time taking a strand between two fingers. "You see? You don't even realize how great a parent you are," he said, shaking his head.

Harry's words seemed to settle in Hermione's brain at a slower pace than usual. When she took in his words, Hermione laughed again, standing up. "When did we become those people who only talk about their children?"

Harry stood up as well. "I don't know..." Harry pretended to ponder. "There must be something else to talk about?"

There was a slightly awkward moment created by their positioning between the ottoman and armchair. Harry felt his chest lightly graze Hermione's before he took a forcible step back, moving the chair with him.

Hermione looked to the clock above the mantelpiece. It was half past eleven. "Well, I should take Hugo home. Thank goodness it's Saturday. At least I have one more day to get that brief done."

"You're telling me," Harry commiserated. "Done with your wine?"

Hermione looked at her glass, half-full and abandoned on the side table by the récamier. She walked over to it, and without a second thought, swiftly drank the remainder.

Harry smiled. "Careful, Granger."

Hermione rolled her eyes, as Harry reached for her glass. After Harry had replaced the wine, he and Hermione slowly ascended the stairs, feeling a bit warm and pleasant as they climbed each step.

As they reached the top, Hermione ventured, "Have you told Ginny about all this? How you feel about the kids?"

Harry paused at the top of the steps and shifted uncomfortably. "No, I haven't. I...I don't want to say she won't understand.... Ginny understands me." Harry paused, struggling. "But, she's so involved with it, you know? She knows first-hand how I wasn't there...she'd probably think I'm being ridiculous...which I am."

Hermione shook her head. "It's not ridiculous, I don't want you to worry over nothing. You should tell Ginny though; she deserves to know what you think, right?"

"Sure," Harry agreed. "Have you told Ron about the Deputy position?" Harry countered.

Hermione looked at the ground. "I haven't. I was hoping that particular rumor would stay within the Ministry until I made up my mind."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed just slightly. "Are you going to take the job without asking him about it?"

"No, no. I'll definitely consult him..."

Harry let out a snort.

"What?" Hermione asked.

Harry smiled as he moved towards the hallway. "Nothing, you just have a funny way of speaking. 'Consult.'"

Hermione didn't ask for more clarification as she followed Harry to Lily's room. Lily and Hugo were just as they had left him, except that Lily arms were splayed out across the bed. Before entering the room, Hermione turned to Harry.

"Well, have a good night," she said.

"You as well," Harry replied, leaning down to kiss her cheek. Hermione gently pressed her lips to his cheek, her cheekbone lightly brushing his glasses.

"I'll see you Wednesday then?" Harry said, pulling back.

"If not Monday."

"Oh yeah," said Harry. "Well, give Ron my best?"

"Sure, and Ginny mine?"

"Of course...and remind Hugo about his Firebolt on Wednesday."

"Sure, sure," Hermione said out of habit. A second later, she looked back at Harry. "Thank you for suggesting that. It was exactly what he needed."

Harry smiled at her. Hermione squeezed his elbow once more, as she had done at King's Cross. She stepped into Lily's room, took hold of Hugo's wrist, and disappeared.

Chapter 2: The Callahan Matter

"Chief?"

Harry looked up as his secretary Gwendolyn Fuller peeked in the doorway. "Yeah. What is it?"

Harry had been feeling harassed all morning. When he floo-ed into work at six, he was greeted by what turned out to be an unplanned press conference. The news had gotten out Sunday night that there had been an instance of "excessive force" by one of his top Aurors. The Prophet and several other prominent publications were asking for a comment from the Head of the Auror Department. He spent the rest of the morning in his office, ignoring the whizzing inter-departmental memos zooming around his light fixture.

"New report from Stonehouse. No new developments," Gwen said as she slipped a thin file onto Harry's desk.

"Thanks," Harry said, turning back to his work before he looked up at Gwen. "Hey, Gwen. Come here; close the door."

Gwen shut the door, looking curiously at him.

"Go ahead and sit down. I want to ask you something," Harry said as he leaned back slightly in his chair.

Gwen sat down on the leather sofa that faced Harry's desk; the light from the mottled glass ceiling above her gave her face a mottled glow.

"What's the mood out there?" Harry asked.

Gwen sighed, "I really can't tell you, Chief. Some think the Ministry is in the right, discharging Callahan from the AD and snapping his wand. But you know what kind of pull he had around here. There are a lot of people that don't like the way things are progressing. A lot of people don't believe he would do that. They say he's being set up as an example..."

"Right," Harry said, troubled. "Is that sentiment directed towards anyone in particular?"

"Not in the Auror Department, per se," Grace replied, looking apprehensive. "I mean, Callahan acted alone. He didn't take anyone down with him. I think the anger is probably directed towards Magical Law Enforcement, and perhaps the Minister."

Harry wanted to ask if he, Harry, was seen as pursuing the Callahan case too hard. But he resisted. He could tell by the stiff manner of his fellow Aurors this morning that many of them thought he was abandoning one of the Department's most trusted and effective Aurors.

"Well, thanks. I'll read the report and we'll move from there. Keep the memos on your end, will you, unless they're important?"

"Sure thing, boss," She said moving towards the door. "Counselor Granger should be here by noon, I believe."

"Thanks," Harry said, glancing down at his watch. Quarter past eleven.

Dubiously, Harry glanced at the yellow folder Gwen had left on his desk. He slid it towards his end and pulled back the cover. The file was marked Top Secret.

The first page included a summary of Callahan's case. Callahan had been on assignment in Cainscross on August 29th. There had been rumors that the perpetrator of a recent spate of robberies in Diagon Alley could be holed up there. The situation became more serious when the alleged assailant was identified as an ex-Voldemort supporter, one Deedrick Rudge. Cainscross was his hometown. No one, including Harry, expected Rudge to flee to his hometown, and so Harry sent Callahan to the area alone, as the Auror was already in the vicinity.

What happened next made no sense to Harry. The report stated that Callahan arrived at 9 Ashway Court, Rudge's childhood home, at eleven that night. He had found a Muggle family inside who had never heard of Deedrick Rudge. For some inexplicable reason, Callahan did not seem to believe them. The rest of the report was rather gruesome. According to the report, and Callahan's most recent interrogation yesterday, Callahan tied up the Muggle couple's two children—a girl of fifteen and a boy of twelve. He performed illegal and invasive legilimency on all four of them, demanding to

know Rudge's whereabouts. The couple begged for their children to be left alone. It was at that point that Callahan used the Cruciatus curse on both of them. Before he left, Callahan performed a violent version of the Memory Charm. Each member of the family had suffered significant memory loss.

When Harry got word of the attack, he had the family quietly relocated to Saint Mugo's in the hopes they could restore their memory. Thus far, there was no progress. The teenage girl was still in a magical coma.

He flipped through Callahan's most recent interrogation. A line in his testimony seemed to jump off the page.

Callahan: I was happy to do it. The regulations these days...they bind the hands of an Auror. If it were a wizard, no one would have looked twice if I used legilimency. Only if it's Muggles does this Ministry seem to have a problem. They forget who they represent.

There was a knock at the door.

"Chief Potter, your twelve o'clock."

Hermione stepped into the room. Harry quickly took in her appearance. She was wearing a tight, pinstriped dress. A matching half-cape hung askance on her small frame, leaving one shoulder bare. The skirt stopped just before her knees, directing Harry's eyes downward to her red heels. A red scarf was tied around her neck. Her hair was loose, but neat.

"Thanks, Gwen," Harry said as his assistant sidled out of the room. Harry stood and walked towards Hermione. He briefly kissed her cheek. "Well, you look good. What's the occasion?"

Hermione smiled. "Just an unrelated court hearing. I've just come from there." She looked around the office. "Should we start here?"

Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets. "You know, why don't we go to lunch? I don't know if you noticed, but the atmosphere is kind of tense in here today."

Hermione nodded. "So that explains the cold reception I just got."

Harry smiled ruefully at her. "It's not you, darling—just your department in general. Let me grab my coat."

Despite the tense mood in the Auror Department, Harry and Hermione received quite a few waves and "hellos" as they made their way across the Ministry's Atrium. Harry chanced a glance at the fountain at the center of the long hall. It was a round orb, the earth. Impressed into its surface, almost as if they were sinking into it, were the figures of a wizard, witch, Muggle, centaur, goblin, and house elf. Their hands were linked. Crystal water ran from the northern pole of the orb and slid down the crevices of the statues' faces.

Harry and Hermione squeezed themselves into a red telephone booth and ascended to the street level. Hermione's back was pressed against him and Harry had to lift his chin a bit to keep his face out of her hair. She smelt faintly of lilies and new books.

They stepped into the deserted alley and Hermione turned to him. "What are you feeling? We could apparate to Diagon Alley or we can just wander around here?"

"I feel like Muggle food, I don't know about you?" Harry ventured.

"Sure," Hermione said. "Have any cash on you?"

Harry dug into his wallet for a moment. He looked up at her, laughing. "Two quid. Sorry."

"It's fine," Hermione said, reaching into the pocket of her cape and removing three galleons. "Come stand by me."

Harry moved towards her, shielding her wand from view and Hermione transfigured the three galleons into three 10 pound notes. Hermione replaced her wand and stepped away.

"Sure that'll work?" Harry asked.

"Yes, of course," Hermione said distractedly. "They won't even know. I made sure it was permanent as well—they'll be able to use the money forever."

"I think I'm supposed to point out—just as an the Head of the Auror Department—that counterfeiting money is illegal in Muggle England."

"Pish posh," Hermione laughed. "We're in a recession. The laws of economics state the more cheap money the better."

Harry laughed as they made their way down the alley. They emerged into the sunlight of a busy, central London avenue. Businessmen on their lunch break were crowding several well-known establishments, forcing Harry and Hermione into a relatively vacant Vietnamese restaurant.

As the waitress left with their orders (two bowls of Pho), Harry tried to delay the inevitable conversation. "You look very nice today, I think I said?"

"Yeah," Hermione said. "Not my usual slacks and button-down, I know."

"I like it," Harry said honestly, bringing his bubble tea to his mouth.

Hermione smiled sweetly. "Well, don't get used to it. I can't pull off heels everyday, even with Morton's Heel Pain-be-Gone."

Harry didn't know why he said what he did next. "Ginny wears heels everyday."

Hermione nodded. "Well, that's because Ginny is just baller that way. Three kids and she still looks fabulous."

Harry laughed at her use of slang. It was sort of cute, in a Hermione way. "You don't need to wear heels if you don't want.... You look just as wonderful."

Hermione blinked. There was an awkward pause, interrupted by the arrival of their food. They slurped their Pho in companionable silence for a few minutes. After a moment, Hermione looked up at Harry and said, "We should probably get to talking about what we've been avoiding."

Harry put down his spoon, resigned. "Right."

"I don't like it any more than you, Harry," Hermione said, fiddling with her purse. She pulled out a sheaf of paper and a fountain pen. "But, I will need your comments on the matter, for my report."

"Right," Harry said again. "Just tell me what Lakey decides and don't move before you discuss things with me."

"I won't," Hermione assured him. She grasped her wand in her cloak and muttered "Silencio."

"Muffliato," Harry whispered.

"All right. First tell me your understanding of the facts. When did you send Callahan to Cainscross? What did you tell him to do there?" Hermione asked, her pen poised.

Harry took a sip of his soup. He briefly looked at her face—her eyes had a bright spark in them—she was "business" Hermione. He didn't like to be on the receiving end of that look.

"Well, we received a tip from a witness at Diagon Alley after the robbery on the 29th. It was the shopkeeper of the witch's boutique next to the apothecary. She said she had seen a man in a brown cloak running from the store. He had a baldhead and a scar running along his scalp, upwards from his ear. I didn't receive the report directly—it went into the interpool. One of my Aurors said she recognized the description as Deedrick Rudge. She was dispatched to the shopkeeper for a follow-up interview. When she returned, it was about four that afternoon. I confirmed the details with her and asked for a background search. She gave me his standard file. I wrote down several locations to monitor, including his last known whereabouts in London, his girlfriend's residence in Leicester, and his childhood home—at Cainscross."

Hermione was scribbling away, barely looking at him.

"I then sent out a national dispatch, ordering all available Aurors within 50 miles of these locations to contact Headquarters immediately. I sent five Aurors to the London location. Two went to Liecester. Only Callahan was available anywhere near Cainscross. He had been in Gloucester, following up on an unrelated lead. At this time, it was probably eight in the evening. I spoke to him directly via patronus. I gave him the address—9 Ashway Court. He replied

that he would do some initial reconnaissance of the area and report back to me within an hour. By 'reconnaissance,' we both understood that to mean he would scope out the area. At most, he could use demystifying charms to determine if there was any notable deception in the house. If he found anything, he was to report back to me immediately and I would issue an entry warrant. When I finished speaking with him, he seemed completely in his senses.

"As I think has been reported in the papers, no one expected Rudge would return to his childhood home for sanctuary," Harry said, frustrated. "I certainly did not. I imagined that Callahan would go to the address, perform a few auditory-enhancing spells and anti-deception charms, and determine there was nothing amiss. In all honesty, I didn't expect him to report back. Theo Callahan has an independent streak in him. There have been times when I've known he's been sent on a meaningless task, and he likely won't report back until the next morning. So, I left the office that night around 10, leaving the overnight staff with orders to contact me if Callahan sent his report to Headquarters. I apparated home—I helped Ginny with the wash. The kids were leaving for school in two days, as you know. I went to bed without hearing from Headquarters."

Hermione put down her pen and took a sip of her now-room temperature soup. "Okay, and when you heard of the attack?"

Harry winced slightly. "I actually got the report from the London Muggle station chief. He had received a report of strange activity in Cainscross. He's one of the few Muggles who would recognize wizard activity on paper, and the signs were all there—all four family members passed out in their sitting room. No memory of the events. The severity of their memory loss was also a cause for alarm.

"I receive a phone call from Commissioner Hewett at 6:30 that morning. I linked up the address on the police report with my orders to Callahan—of course, they were the same. I sent Aurors to the scene, had the family removed from the local clinic and transported to St. Mungo's. At the same time, I was trying to find Callahan. We eventually found him at the Leaky Cauldron of all places. He didn't seem at all perturbed that we'd come to arrest him. And that was all."

"Have you spoken directly to Callahan since?"

"No. I was there for his discharge in Stonehouse. Lakey was there to snap his wand. I signed some papers and disappeared. Lakey told me he wants to keep him there for the time being, as he'll likely have to be tried there. I'll be visiting tomorrow."

"Right," Hermione said. "And this is the full account of your involvement in the Callahan matter?"

"Yes, counselor," Harry replied.

Hermione considered Harry for a moment. "Okay, then. I should tell you that Lakey's asked me to come with you two to see Callahan. He's letting me take the lead on this case."

Harry looked up, startled. "Are you...are you sure you want in on this one? It'll be all over the papers in the next few weeks. You know the punishment for Muggle torture..."

"I know." Hermione replied, replacing her paper into her purse. She took down the silencing charms and the din of the café pressed against their ears. "That's why I want in on this one," her reply ferocious.

Harry looked away on comfortably; his eyes settled on the window behind Hermione's head. Men in business suits and women in brightly colored dresses were fluttering by. "Hermione," Harry said slowly, "have you read the most recent interrogation of Callahan?"

"I have." Her face was like stone.

"Then you know...from the looks of things, he has some anti-Muggle opinions."

"I reckoned as much."

Harry waited for her to say more. "Hermione...you know that if he really did what he's accused of, he deserves everything that's coming to him. But, you should know that he has his allies in the Ministry, not least among the Aurors."

Harry paused before continuing, his voice low. "Truth be told, we have all used 'excessive force' at some time or another," Harry said,

looking down. "I include myself in that—restraint is one of the hardest duties an Auror..."

"Then you should teach them restraint, Harry."

He could tell she was angry with him.

Hermione continued. "And there are degrees of excessive force. I know you've used legilimency without authorization, but you've never used the Cruciatus. You've never obliviated without cause."

Harry looked down.

"We can't make excuses for people like Callahan, Harry, no matter how talented or well-respected the wizard."

Harry's brow crinkled and he looked back at Hermione. There was bright gloss over her brown eyes. "Hermione, I understand your concern. Believe me, I won't spare any Auror in my department who behaves like Callahan in the future. But, you haven't spoken to him directly. You haven't worked with him for eight years; in all that time, I never knew him to say a harsh word about a Muggle or Muggle-born."

Hermione glared at him for a moment. Then, her face relaxed. "I know, Harry. I certainly don't want to give you the impression that I won't give Callahan a fair hearing. I will—but if it turns out to be true, I'll go after him with the full strength of wizarding law behind me."

Harry gave Hermione a half-smile. "Of that, I am sure," he said.

Harry and Hermione left their money on the table. The sky was darkening above them as they walked towards the alley.

"Remind me to pay you back," Harry said.

Hermione giggled. "In what? Transfigured currency?"

Harry chuckled.

"Don't worry Harry," Hermione said, "I magically repaired their cappuccino machine when you weren't looking. I can somewhat confidently say I saved them a hundred pound."

"Ah, I see. Hermione Granger always finds a way to be moral, just like that time you left those Muggles money when we stole bread and eggs from their farm our seventh year."

A gust of wind down the alley way pushed Hermione and Harry closer together. Hermione placed her hand in the crook of Harry's arm. "Simple common decency," Hermione said, teasing.

Harry smiled as he opened the door of the booth for Hermione. She dialed the keypad as Harry latched the door shut. This time, they faced each other in the cramped interior of booth.

As they descended in the darkness, Hermione said, "So, we'll be going to Stonehouse tomorrow? Where exactly is that?"

"Well, it's near Wales—near the Forest of Dean."

The light from the Atrium began at their feet and worked its way up.

Chapter 3: What's Coming

Upon a directive from the Minister, Harry caved in and gave a few quotes to the Prophet regarding the Callahan case. Thus, Harry was standing in the large pressroom adjacent to the Atrium. He tried to be as forthright as possible about what he new, but there were certain questions he thought best to keep obscure.

"Do you know what spells Callahan used on the Muggles, Mr. Potter?" a doughy gentleman asked Harry.

"I'm not a liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation," Harry said for the fourth time.

"Chief Potter," a young female reporter asked, "do you know who the public defender will be against Callahan?"

Harry's mind flew to Hermione. He paused. "That's a question for the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I leave it to his good judgment."

Harry gathered his things in his darkened office. It was past ten, and about a dozen Aurors remained in their cubicles. As Harry passed into the Atrium, heading towards the massive stone fireplaces on either side of the hall, he looked up towards the Magical Law Enforcement Department. The department had offices facing out into the Atrium, and while Hermione's small office did not, he thought he saw a faint glimmer through the windowpane that corresponded to her office down the hall.

Minutes later, Harry was standing in the hearth of his own fireplace at home. Harry was shaking the soot off his robes when he heard footsteps approaching.

"Hey, Gin," Harry sighed. He put down his briefcase as Ginny moved towards him. She pulled him into an embrace, and then stepped back.

"I wish you had told me that you were going to be so late," she said. "I had to call mum to watch Lily while I was at the Tornados game."

"I'm sorry, dear," said Harry, tired. "I couldn't have planned for things to take as long as they did. I hope it didn't cause Molly too much trouble?"

"Oh no, she was happy to do it," Ginny said as she turned and headed towards the kitchen. "Do you want me to fix you anything? Mum left some casserole in the fridge. Looks really good—at least I think it put Lily in a food coma."

Harry chuckled. "I'm all right, thanks." He looked up towards the stairs longingly. His bed was calling to him. "I think I'll head up to bed. I'm exhausted..."

Abruptly, he remembered his trip to Stonehouse. "Oh, but darling, I might —"

Ginny cut him off with a gasp. "Oh, Harry! How could I forget to tell you? I got an owl from Albus today. He was sorted into Gryffindor! Isn't that lovely?"

Ginny embraced him again and Harry patted her back. "That's wonderful news."

"Poor dear," Ginny was saying. "So worried he would end up in Slytherin. I think your little talk at the platform may have calmed his nerves. Did you really ask the Sorting Hat to be placed in Gryffindor?"

Harry smiled somewhat half-heartedly. "Sure, I asked. I was deathly afraid of Slytherin myself."

"So that means the Hat was actually thinking of putting you in Slytherin?"

"Yes, I think it was," Harry answered truthfully.

"Ugh Harry! Thank God it didn't," she exclaimed, sticking out her tongue.

Harry had to smile at the childlike gesture. "Oh, it's really not that bad. I'm sure I would have managed—just as Albus would have managed."

"Please," said Ginny, shaking her head. "Don't even think about it."

She turned towards the kitchen and Harry followed slowly. When she got to the table, she turned back to Harry. "Oh, and little Rose is also in Gryffindor. Good on the hat to keep our family together."

Harry smiled. "Yes, now all we have left is Lily and Hugo."

"Yes, yes," Ginny said absently as she cleared some of her papers off the kitchen table.

"I'll have to write to Albus before I leave," Harry said, leaning against the doorjamb. "I'll likely be on assignment all day tomorrow, so please don't worry about supper."

"Assignment?" Ginny perked up. Harry hadn't been on an assignment in months. Moreover, the word "assignment" usually meant that Harry couldn't give any specifics.

"Right. I understand..." she paused. "This doesn't have to do with the Callahan stuff, does it? So ridiculous the fuss they're making. Just give him a reprimand and be done with it."

Harry was glad Hermione wasn't in the room to hear that. "Unfortunately, it's a bit more complicated than that, darling. In any case, I'll be away most of tomorrow. Hermione will be too."

Ginny stopped sorting her papers. "Oh? She's working on the same case?"

"Yes," Harry answered. "Just this once. I think her boss is testing her to see if she can handle the case on her own. I spoke with her today. She's pretty passionate about the subject..."

Harry thought he saw Ginny roll her eyes slightly. "Well, she would be."

Harry, not sure what to make of Ginny's comment, said, "Um, so please don't worry about dinner. I'll likely be back in the late evening. If you could leave me some of Molly's stuff, that'd be great."

Ginny smiled and walked towards him. "Sure thing, darling. You look so tired. Go get some sleep and wake me up when you leave?"

"Sure," Harry replied, his thoughts on his bed. He kissed Ginny goodnight—he could faintly smell the Quidditch pitch in her clothes. "Good night, dear. Love you."

Minutes later, Harry slipped between the sheets of his and Ginny's massive bed; he was glad for the peace. He drifted to sleep almost instantly.

Harry awoke at 5:30. He fumbled around for his glasses on the side table and slipped them on. He looked to his right and saw Ginny's slim frame lying several feet away from him. They're bed was 17th century estate bed with large ivory hangings. It was notable for its size—about 16 feet across. Harry once measured that it took eight full roll-overs to travel from end to end. This morning, Harry shuffled over to Ginny's end and placed a kiss on her temple.

"Darling, I'm leaving," Harry said.

Ginny mumbled incoherently.

Harry kissed her again and she moved her face away. Harry smiled slightly. Ginny was not much of a morning person. In all the nights she had told him to wake her up when he left for work, she was usually too groggy to kiss him goodbye.

Harry gently kissed the corner of her lips and moved out of the bed.

After a quick shower, some coffee, and a piece of toast, Harry was in his office by six. Harry packed some files into his attaché and took the elevator to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He found Hermione and the Head of the Department, John Lakey, waiting for him.

"Mornin', Harry," Lakey said with a jovial wave.

Lakey was a husky man with ever-present stubble on his round, yet somehow well-defined, face. He was about ten years older than Hermione and Harry and a veritable legal genius. Moreover, Lakey was the intellectual founder of wizard-Muggle integration legal theory, and thus he had his enemies among the wizarding public, despite the fact that he was a pureblood stretching back seven

generations. It was well known that he was Hermione's professional mentor.

As Lakey grasped Harry's hand, Harry chanced a glance at Hermione. She was dressed much less formally than the day before. She wore dark green corduroy pants and with a gray tweed jacket over a delicate white blouse. Lakey waited until Harry had greeted Hermione with a kiss on the cheek before he spoke.

"Harry, I hope you don't mind that it'll only be my people down at Stonehouse today," Lakey said. "Certainly you understand that since he is no longer an Auror, this is out of your jurisdiction. Hermione insisted you remain involved, however."

Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I appreciate that John. Once the details of the case are released to the public, there's likely going to be an overview of Auror recruitment and training. My involvement now could help ease the transition."

"I'm happy to help you in any way I can, Harry. You're the most reasonable Head of the Auror Department I've ever worked with," Lakey laughed. "I'd break my wand before I jeopardize your position in the Department—though, the world would have to go raving mad before Harry Potter is pushed out of the Auror Department."

Harry smiled automatically. He had never taken his appointment as chief of the Aurors for granted; yet, it was a running joke in the office that his position was a lifetime appointment after the defeat of the Dark Lord.

"Harry," Hermione said. "John and I would like to give you a rundown of the timeline from here on out. After our evaluation of Callahan today, he will be assigned an attorney for his arraignment, which will be in four days' time. We'll get the court date then and move from there. Obviously, that means the details of the case will be made public and we'll have to prepare for that fallout. We've already made the decision that Callahan will be tried in the Gloucester Division of the Wizengamot, so as to avoid the politics of the case here in London."

"Fine," Harry said. "I'm all for keeping this trial as apolitical as possible. Obviously, the obscure nature of the facts means that the whole case is open to misinterpretation. I'll likely put a media

blackout on my department. No Aurors will be commenting on the case—does that sound fair?"

"It's more than I could ask," Lakey said, looking at Harry. "Thank you."

"Sure. Should we get on with it then?"

"Sure," replied Lakey. "We'll be apparating to the same location as last time, Harry—the holding cells at Stonehouse. You can take Hermione, as she's never been..."

Harry moved to Hermione's side and took hold of her hand. He glanced quickly at her face. She smiled nervously at him and steadied her breath. For a moment, Harry was transported to a time when Hermione often gave him that look—usually right before they were about to do something truly dangerous, like rescue an Azkaban escapee or infiltrate the Ministry of Magic.

A second later, Harry and Hermione were standing in the dank interior of an underground room. There was a small 'pop' behind them and Lakey appeared.

"All right, follow me," Lakey directed. Hermione moved forward, her hand still in Harry's. She did not let go until their eyes had adjusted to the darkness.

Lakey took them to the end of a hallway, where two wizards in dark suits were conversing and sipping steaming cups of coffee.

"Director," the younger of the two men said, acknowledging Lakey. They were obviously counselors from Lakey's department. "He just woke up fifteen minutes ago. He should be presentable for your interview."

"Thank you, Stahls. I take it that Wilkes will be arriving shortly?"

Harry spun sharply in the direction of Lakey. "You called her in for this?"

"I had to Harry," Lakey said, with an offhand glance in Harry's direction. "It's the only avenue we haven't tried. Stahls?"

The younger man was staring at Harry, as though transfixed. The Director's words brought him back to himself. "Sir—yes, I believe she said she'd arrive within 10 minutes or so."

"We had best wait until she arrives then," Lakey sighed.

Lakey stepped away from the two young lawyers and Harry and Hermione followed him a short distance away.

Harry's eyes were sharp as he turned on Lakey. "You didn't inform me this would be a magical evaluation. How did you get him to consent to this?" Harry's eyes widened. "You haven't received consent, have you?"

"Harry," Lakey said calmly. "Callahan has been more than forthright in all of his interviews thus far. We are bringing in Wilkes because we are confident that Callahan will consent to the evaluation. If he doesn't, then we won't proceed, shall we? There's no need to worry—remember it's our job to cover these sorts of bases."

Harry was still fuming. Hermione reached out and clasped his arm. "Harry, please don't worry. We have to know what we're dealing with, don't we?"

Harry looked at her, feeling somewhat calmer. "Of course...but a magical evaluation...this won't be well-received in the Auror Department."

"We'll leak that information slowly Harry. Not at the arraignment," Lakey said. He looked past Harry's shoulder and glared.

Just then, Harry felt someone tap him on the shoulder. It was the young lawyer, Stahl.

"Mr. Chief Harry Potter...sir," he said somewhat breathless. "I'm Donald Stahl. I was wondering if I might have your autograph, sir? I have a young daughter and son at home who'd be thrilled, you see? For some reason, you've become their hero. Not that you need a reason! I certainly don't, I mean...I'm sure you get it all the time. Please, if it's not too much trouble?"

Hermione released Harry's arm. "Don, really?" she said incredulously.

Harry laughed at the look on Hermione's face. "Sure, Don. I'd be happy to. Have any parchment on you?"

The young lawyer produced parchment from his robes so fast that Harry would have missed it if he blinked. Lakey was chuckling now.

"They're names are Al and Eugenie," Stahl said. "If you could say something about keeping on their schoolwork and minding their mother, that would be great."

"Sure," Harry said, removing a pen from his cloak. "I have a son named Al. He was sorted into Gryffindor just yesterday."

Stahl looked like he just might keel over in pleasure with that nugget of confidence from Harry Potter.

Hermione smiled at Harry.

"There you are," Harry said, handing Stahl the parchment. The young lawyer stared at the paper and then back at Harry. For one horrifying moment, Hermione thought he would bow.

"That's enough now, Stahl. She's coming,"

Stahl retreated to his desk and Harry, Hermione, and Lakey turned in the direction of the darkened hallway. The sound of far off footsteps clattering off the stone reached their ears. The silhouette of a slight woman emerged in the wet darkness. She was much shorter than Hermione—Asian with short black hair cut in straight line and high cheekbones. She was wearing a black cloak over her equally black clothing.

"Annie," Lakey said, approaching her and kissing her on the cheek. "Thanks for coming. We'll get started now."

The woman stopped and looked at Harry. Her face broke into a smile. "Harry, so pleasant to see you once again."

Harry smiled awkwardly.

"You haven't called for me in so long, I was wondering if you forgot about me?" the woman said.

"Not at all, Anne. We just cover things a bit more...methodically these days. You understand."

Her eyes were still trained on Harry. "Of course. But every once in a while I prove useful. I'd hate for you to forget that, Harry." She smiled once more and moved in front of Harry and Hermione, following Lakey down the hall.

Harry glanced at Hermione. She had a slightly sour expression on her face. "Guess you've never met her before?" Harry ventured.

"No...is it normal to get a creepy vibe from her?"

"From Annie Wilkes," Harry considered, "yes."

Harry and Hermione followed the pair back down the hallway. As they passed the desk with the two young attorneys, Harry heard their whispered argument.

"I can't believe you did that," said the lawyer who Harry did not know.

"Shut up. I got it didn't I?" said Stahl.

Lakey escorted them into another darkened hallway, stopping before a small and sterile cell. The lighting was dim inside, but Harry could make out Callahan's figure lying across a narrow bed.

"Incendio," Lakey cried, and light flew into the wooden chandelier hanging above Callahan's cell.

The scene came into focus. Callahan was sitting up from his cot. He was wearing the clothes he had been arrested in—they were crumpled after several nights' sleep. Usually clean-shaven, Callahan had noticeable gold stubble on his cheeks. His light blond hair stuck up at strange angles.

"Mr. Callahan," Lakey said curtly, "we're here for the final evaluation before your arraignment. Please stand against the back wall."

Callahan stood slowly. His eyes locked with Harry's as he took several steps backwards.

Lakey pointed his wand at the cell door and it swung on its hinges. He conjured five chairs, filling the small space. Lakey directed Callahan into the fifth chair. Harry, Hermione, Lakey, and Wilkes seated themselves side by side in the remaining four, their backs to the open cell door.

"Now, Mr. Callahan," Lakey began. "You have been formally charged under Article 9 of the Wizard Criminal Law Code of Britain with the severe mistreatment of Muggles. This includes violations of the Humane Treatment of Human Species and Variants, circa 1632, and the Muggle Protection Act of 2008. Your charges include unauthorized entry into a private residence; the use of legilimency without a warrant; the illegal use of legilimency on two minors; the unwarranted use of legilimency on Muggles; two counts of the use of the Unforgivable Curse, the Cruciatus; two counts of using an Unforgivable Curse, the Cruciatus, on a Muggle; four counts of the unauthorized use of an Obliviation spell; four counts of the use of an Obliviation spell at level five severity with the danger of irreversibility.

"You are endowed with the right to a legal counselor of your choice," Lakey continued. "Your family is entitled to earnings compensation for the duration of your trial. At your arraignment, you are entitled to ask for release on bail. You are allowed to seek visitation with your family and with a social worker. Do you understand the charges and the rights entitled to you through wizarding law?"

"Yes," Callahan replied.

"All right. Thank you, Mr. Callahan," Lakey paused, passing a glance at Hermione. Her face was like stone, but Harry could feel the heat radiating off of her.

Lakey turned back to Callahan. "Do you have a counselor for your defense?"

"No."

"Would you like the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to appoint a counselor?"

"Sure."

Lakey and Harry shared a glance. "All right," Lakey continued. "We have received offers from three private counselors. Would you like us to leave you with information regarding each counselor?"

"You can choose," Callahan said calmly.

Harry felt Hermione shift at his side.

"Mr. Callahan," Lakey said, uncomfortable for the first time. "It is pro forma that you choose your own counselor..."

"And I am saying you may choose for me."

Lakey stared at the man before him for a moment. Callahan was reclining in the straight-backed chair Lakey had provided, his ankles crossed. He seemed perfectly at his ease.

"All right. As you wish Mr. Callahan. Moving on—the social worker appointed to your case is Ms. Gertrude Staub. She will be making daily visits before your arraignment, and bi-weekly visits thereafter. She can answer any questions you have about incarceration conditions, food, visitation, etc."

Callahan nodded.

"Do you have any questions for me?" Lakey asked.

Callahan looked directly at Harry. "No."

Lakey took in a deep breath. "All right, thank you Mr. Lakey. That concludes the first portion of our evaluation. Now..." he looked at Hermione. "Now, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would like to request a magical evaluation of your person. Ms. Granger?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Mr. Callahan, given the obscure nature of your case and the inability to obtain eye-witness reports of the incident, we are requesting a magical evaluation to be undertaken by a licensed practitioner, Ms. Anne Wilkes," Hermione gestured stiffly to the dark woman beside Harry. "At your consent, we will conduct the procedure presently..."

Callahan cut her off. "Sure, Granger. I have no problem with that."

Harry felt something seize in his gut, like a previously unknown reflex. The malice Callahan was able to load into that word—Granger—seemed to send a bead of electricity up Harry's spine. He felt the sudden urge to stand between Hermione and Callahan, to pull his best friend to him.

Hermione seemed unmoved. "I am required to tell you what the process entails. Ms. Wilkes will place you in a magical coma—she will then use a combination of a priori legilmency and mental deconstruction of your person. This will allow us to determine whether you have been placed under any enchantment or curse that may have influenced your decision-making process the night of August 29th. The process will last for approximately thirty minutes and you will likely need to rest for the remainder of the day to regain full functionality. Do you understand this process? If so, please either reject or accept this proposal. Please understand you are under no compulsion to accept."

"I accept."

"All right." Hermione said.

Lakey stood, and Harry followed suit. He was jumpy.

"Anne, I leave it to you," Lakey said. "We'll be right outside the door."

Hermione brushed past both men and stepped out of the cell. Harry moved more slowly after Lakey, looking first at Callahan and then at Anne. She gave him a level stare before she shot him a half-smile. Harry nodded to her and stepped into the hallway.

Hermione and Lakey were further down the hall. Harry looked at them curiously. Lakey had both his hands on Hermione's shoulders. He had brought his head down to her eye level and seemed to be talking sternly to her.

Harry turned back to the cell. Anne had her wand out and was waving it in front of Callahan, who was watching her with a disinterested expression. Slowly, his mouth began to slacken. His arms fell to his side and his ankles uncrossed. Finally, his head fell backwards. Anne seemed to be shaking and she had both arms

raised aloft. Harry heard a faint whirring sound, like an invisible current of electricity was passing between the two persons inside the cell.

Harry stared at them, not out of interest, but to distract himself from the conversation between Hermione and Lahey. He had seen a magical evaluation several times before, especially as a new Auror. He had even conducted a few of them as well. In the days after Voldemort's fall, Voldemort's supporters used a wide variety of excuses to justify their actions under the Dark Lord's reign. The Ministry soon found that they could not try every individual who had worked for the Dark Lord. Many of them were acting out of fear for their own lives. The problem, from a legal standpoint, was the few prominent individuals who had carried out particularly destructive orders—the murder of wizards and Muggles, torture, and rape, among others. A large number of the perpetrators claimed to be under the Imperious Curse, the favorite excuse after Voldemort's first fall from power.

However, technology had changed in the past 17 years since Voldemort's first fall. A new technique from America had made its way to England—a form of mental examination that determined whether an individual was indeed under an Imperious Curse. As the Imperious Curse ends with the death of the caster, these accused individuals claimed they had been cursed and were only brought to their senses with the death of Voldemort. The new examination allowed Aurors to test their claims, as the procedure allowed the examiner to go back through the individual's magical past. The procedure had several advantages. For instance, in comparison to Veritaserum, the procedure was vastly superior. Namely, people under the Imperious Curse were impervious to Veritaserum. The nature of the Unforgivable Curse allowed individuals to lie even under its influence. The magical evaluation, on the other hand, could account for such discrepancies and determine whether the individual was placed under any curse whatsoever. Needless to say, the procedure released a flood of evidence that led to convictions—half the cells in Azkaban were filled in such a way.

However, the procedure came under criticism when it started being used on a more casual basis—in other words, on petty criminals, not war criminals. The Prophet's editorial page liked to refer to the procedure as "mind-rape." The press called it an insidious American export that was corrupting the humanitarian values of the British

wizarding order. In response, the Ministry passed new regulations to control the procedure. Any practitioners of magical evaluations would have to be licensed by the Ministry of Magic. The expressed consent of the accused also had to be obtained. Since the procedure could be performed indefinitely on a subject (to the individual's first use of magic as a child), temporal limits were imposed to restrict examinations only to the point where the crime was actually committed. Moreover, the longer the procedure, the longer the recovery time for the examined individual. In a few early cases of the procedure, some individuals never recovered their full mental functionality. That obviously had ramifications for legal prosecution.

The temporal limits also obscured the background of the crime, including such facts as whether the accused received support from other wizards and other details that could have led to more convictions. Now, the procedure was merely used to determine the presence of an Unforgivable Curse, not to piece together a case history or search for additional people to hunt down. This last restriction faced fierce resistance from the Aurors, including Harry. In those days, the threat of a post-Voldemort uprising among his remaining supports was a palpable threat. To Harry, and many others in his department, the procedure was an unfortunate necessity.

That being said, Harry hated the procedure. The few times he conducted a magical evaluation were incredibly uncomfortable. Harry did not apply for a license when the new regulations came out. Conducting the evaluation itself was somewhat like watching a murky filmstrip in reverse. The magical details were exceptionally sharp, however. Harry could vicariously feel every spell the individual had cast—and since all of the individuals he had conducted the procedure on were dark wizards, the experience was understandably painful. When Harry took charge of the Auror Department eight years ago, he stipulated that every Auror who wanted to use of the procedure had seek permission from Harry, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the Head of the Department of Inculcation of Wizarding Values. Understandably, the red tape led to a decrease in the procedure's use.

And here, Harry was watching the procedure again for the first time in years. He didn't like to think of the reaction several Aurors would

have when they found out Callahan had been subjected to the procedure. And Harry had to admit, he felt uncomfortable watching an individual he had always been friendly with undergo such an invasive process...

Hermione was standing beside him. Harry turned to look at her. Her face, so flushed moments before, was uncommonly pale. Instinctively, he placed his arm around her shoulders.

"Are you all right?"

She leaned into him slightly. "I'm fine."

Harry looked down the hallway. Lakey was standing underneath a candelabra; he was scribbling something onto a sheaf of parchment.

As Harry turned back to face her, Hermione sensed the question pushing against Harry's lips. "He wants me to get my emotions under control. I have to admit he's right—I was practically boiling earlier...this is harder than I thought," she sighed.

Harry rubbed her arm. "You may have been a bit heated, but you performed your role flawlessly, Hermione. You don't need to apologize for being passionate about this—you'll be prosecuting him after all. But Lakey's right that a cool head might make your job easier in the long-run."

"You're right," Hermione replied. "I didn't give in on one thing though."

"What's that?"

"Lakey wanted to appoint the most inexperienced of the three counselors who offered to defend Callahan. I can't agree to that.... We have to give him the best lawyer possible. So, I made him choose the most renowned counselor on the list. I can't give myself an undue advantage. It wouldn't be right."

Harry nodded in agreement, but he felt his stomach begin to coil into a knot. He understood Hermione's need to have a fair fight, but in that moment, he really wanted Hermione to face an inexperienced lawyer—someone who could make this case a slam-dunk for Hermione. It wasn't that he thought she couldn't win—Hermione had

one of the best track records in the Department—No, it was that he couldn't shake the feeling that Hermione was in danger. He stroked her arm again, on instinct.

"Anyway, I know the guy we've chosen. Not personally, but by reputation. He's a mean mother, I can tell you. He retired five years ago and has a thing against Muggle-borns. It won't be easy, but this case is worth it, don't you think?"

Harry nodded. If possible, his stomach coiled even tighter.

Abruptly, Hermione changed the subject.

"So this Wilkes woman – how do you know her?" she asked.

Harry blinked. "Oh, the Department used to contract her services a few times a year, just for this procedure. I haven't seen her in about a year. That was the last time we had a case with an ex-Voldemort follower..."

"Oh," Hermione said. "I thought you knew her personally."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I did know her in a sense, when I was much younger...you remember when Ginny and I broke up for a while? When I was 22 or so?"

"I remember," Hermione said.

"Well," Harry smiled awkwardly, "Anne and I dated for a while ...or more accurately, we slept together for a while."

"Ah," Hermione said, her grin a little tight. "That explains the flirting earlier. I knew I wasn't wrong about that."

"Yeah, she's sort of like that. Fortunately, we don't see each other too often."

"What did you mean when you told her, 'we do things more methodically these days'?" Hermione asked, looking up at him.

"Well, just that we try to avoid the kind of procedure she specializes in. Plus, her services are pretty expensive. From what I've heard,

she's mostly contracted out to the U.S. and several less savory countries that don't have the rules we have on magical evaluations."

"I see."

Harry and Hermione stood in silence for a while, watching the subject of their conversation. Anne's hands were still suspended in the air. Her slim body was swaying back and forth slightly. Callahan remained unchanged.

"Harry...?" Hermione asked, wrapping her arm around Harry's waist. "How do you feel about all this? I mean—I'm trying to look at things objectively. I'm trying to understand who this man is, why he could have possibly committed the crime we're accusing him of."

Harry sighed. "Hermione...in all honesty, it's hard watching this. I've known this man since I became Head of the Department. I've been out to drinks with him. He's very charismatic and persuasive, and that makes him effective. He was the one I sent to the Minister of Bulgaria to extradite an ex-Voldemort supporter. He never complains; he can do the work of two Aurors easily. His family seems very nice. I don't know what else I can say...he was a good Auror until this."

"He never had any character flaws that you knew of?" the lawyer in Hermione asked.

"He has his flaws, but we all do, don't we?" Harry said, looking down. "I mean...yes, he could be a bit stubborn about his orders, but never anything close to insubordination. He hated busywork—he thought it was beneath his skill as a wizard, so I tried to keep him occupied. As I think I told you, he would send in late reports when he didn't think a case was worth his time. But that's a common personality trait in Aurors—perhaps it bothered him more than others..."

Hermione looked back towards the cell, satisfied for now. Soon, they heard Lakey walking back in their direction. Harry and Hermione separated and stepped away from each other.

"I've got a minute left," Lakey said, looking down at his wristwatch. "They should be coming out of it any moment. Let's go."

The three stepped back into the cell and Lakey removed the remaining four chairs with a flick of his wand. The whirring sound Harry had heard earlier seemed to be fading. It was now just a distant buzz. Callahan's eyelashes were fluttering and Anne was standing solidly on the ground again. After a few more seconds, Anne lurched and almost collapsed to the ground. Harry caught her elbow to steady her.

Her eyes fluttered open and she clung to Harry. Lakey took a step towards Callahan, who had not moved. Lakey checked his pulse and gingerly lifted up one of his eyelids.

"Harry," Anne breathed, "thank you."

"Harry," Lakey called a moment later. "Help me move him to his bed."

Harry released Anne. He picked up Callahan's feet, and Lakey and Harry swung Callahan onto his cot. Callahan seemed to come-to slightly as the laid him down. His eyelids snapped open and he raised a hand lazily to his eyes, as though blocking out a harsh light.

"Ss—all right," Callahan muttered.

"Yes," Lakey said, leaning over Callahan. "How are you feeling?"

Callahan stared at Lakey without answering. Then, his eyes moved past the Director and landed on Harry. "Potter," he muttered. "Potter—"

Despite himself, Harry leaned in closer. Hermione came to his side.

"You let this happen..." Callahan said in a surprisingly decipherable mumble. "You've let Muggles and mudbloods in... you've let them."

"Do they usually talk this much after?" Hermione asked, alarmed. She turned towards Anne.

"They do sometimes. It depends on the person," Anne replied simply.

Hermione's question caught Callahan's attention. "You—I know you...yes, you're that Muggle bitch. The one that's famous. Married

a pureblood and won't even take his name? Ms. Granger. We'd be better off without you—people will see that soon. Better off."

Hermione's face was impassive as she met Callahan's eyes. "We'll see about that, Mr. Callahan. I suggest you prepare yourself for what's coming your way."

With that, she turned and calmly walked out of the cell, her shoes making an even clack, clack on the flagstones.

Chapter 4: The Forest of Dean

Hermione. Harry stood up quickly, lurching towards the cell door.

"Harry," Lakey called, harshly. "Wait for me in the hallway, please."

Harry looked at Lakey. For a moment Harry felt like ignoring him and chasing down Hermione anyway. He relented, however, and moved out into the hallway.

Harry could hear Lakey muttering something to Callahan. There was some shuffling and Lakey's next words were for Anne. "Can I expect a full report by tomorrow? Lunch time at the latest?"

"Sure, Director," Anne said. "It won't take long. I did a thorough review. He wasn't under the Imperious Curse."

Harry turned away from the cell, unsure how he felt about this information. A part of him had been hoping an Imperious Curse would explain Callahan's behavior, that it might put this case quietly to rest.

Lakey and Anne stepped out into the hallway. Lakey directed his wand at the cell door and it swung on its hinges. A low click confirmed that the door was sealed.

"Well, Anne, thank you for your help." Lakey was saying to the dark woman. "Contact me if you have any problems. I look forward to a full report."

"All right, Director. I'm happy to help," Anne said. She turned to Harry. "And goodbye Harry."

She paused at his troubled expression and seemed to consider him for a moment. "Please don't hesitate to call on me Harry, should you need me. I'll always make time for your cases..." She reached down and squeezed his hand before she nodded to Lakey and proceeded down the hallway.

Once she was a few yards away, Harry turned to Lakey. "Well, what is it?"

"There's no need to be cool, Harry," Lakey said, placing one hand on the younger man's shoulder. He directed Harry slowly down the hallway after Anne. "I'd like you to speak to Hermione. I think this case is getting to her head; she's not usually so emotional. To an outside observer she probably looks perfectly in control, but you and I know her better than that."

Lakey stopped. "I'm giving her the rest of the day off. Why don't you speak with her? I've known you nearly as long as I've known Hermione. You've had your own struggles with controlling your emotions in situations like this. From what I've heard, Hermione was usually the person that calmed you down. Can you do the same for her?"

Harry nodded, looking at the ground. He still felt panicky, but Lakey's confidence was helping bring Harry back to himself.

"Thank you," Lakey said. He paused. "This case is very important. Not just to Hermione, but to our Department. We pushed through a lot of reform in the years after Voldemort's fall. Now, there's a growing backlash—people think we took things too far. You and I both know there's still a lot of prejudice against Muggles and Muggle-borns in this country. This case will be an example that the Ministry remains a stalwart defender of the rights of the most vulnerable among us. We can't get complacent."

Finally, Harry voiced the fear that had been forming in his chest all afternoon. "John...do you worry that you're putting a target on Hermione's back with this case? She's a phenomenally capable lawyer, we both know that. But to put her out in the open on this case?...when she's a Muggle-born, when the public mood could easily shift in Callahan's favor...?"

Lakey stared at Harry. "I'm surprised to hear you worry about the politics of a case, Harry. You've supported her more controversial cases in the past..."

"They were not like this. This is an Auror, a respected Auror. Like it or not, Callahan has voiced opinions that a lot of wizards have been thinking. Moreover, the causes Hermione has championed—Muggle integration, intergovernmental consultations, scholarships for Muggle-wizard exchanges, not to mention house-elf liberation—they haven't always been well-received..."

Harry wasn't sure why he was talking like this. He had always supported Hermione's efforts, even if he didn't get directly involved with them.

"Harry," Lake said sternly, "this sort of change isn't easy. But that doesn't mean we should stop pushing for it, does it? I'll be damned if I sideline any counselor in my department out of fear of the politics of the situation. That includes Hermione. She's a grown woman, Harry. She's more than capable of defending herself."

But then Lakey looked to the side. "However, Hermione was not my first choice for this case. I was going to take lead myself. She insisted, though. This is the sort of case she's been waiting for—it's unfortunate that it deals so directly with your department."

"I'm not worried about my department," Harry said viciously. "I'm worried about Hermione. I won't see her publically pilloried in the media. She's given too much to have it spat back in her face..."

Lakey smiled. "Harry, you shouldn't worry about Hermione's popularity. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has been unpopular for a long time. As Hermione rises in the department, she'll undoubtedly face some criticism. Let that be her choice. Besides," Lakey said, turning towards the exit, "Minister Shacklebolt is firmly behind us on this case. With your support as well, Hermione might not face much of a backlash."

Harry nodded, quieted for now.

"So take her to lunch. Help her relax...your Department can manage without you for a day?"

Harry nodded. "I thought we'd be working much later than this. I left instructions with my staff. They aren't expecting me to return today."

"Great," Lakey said as he and Harry approached the desk with the two young counselors. "Thank you, Harry. A little...perspective is all Hermione needs right now."

Harry found Hermione standing outside. The holding cell complex itself was located on the edge of Stonehouse. The air was crisp with the onset of autumn, and a few trees were beginning to change

color in the surrounding hillsides. The grass remained a vibrant green, however.

Harry walked towards her. She was sitting on a wooden bench, staring off in the distance.

"Hey," Harry called as he approached.

Hermione turned. She put on a tight smile. "Hey."

Harry sat down next to her, releasing a long sigh.

"Sorry for storming out just then," Hermione apologized. "I figured there was no point talking to him in that moment."

"You were fine," Harry assured her.

Hermione leaned her head against Harry's shoulder briefly. "Where's John?"

"He disappeared about five minutes ago. He said that you have the rest of the day off—he also suggested we go get some lunch."

"Oh, did he?" Hermione smiled slightly. "A day off? Haven't gotten one of those in a while..."

Harry proceeded cautiously. "Why don't we walk back towards the town? We'll grab some lunch and take it easy the rest of the day."

She looked at him suspiciously. Harry got the feeling she knew exactly what he was doing. It didn't help that Harry was treating her like a wild colt about to throw its rider.

Then she smiled at him. "You don't need to worry about me, Harry. I'm fine. I just needed some fresh air earlier."

"Okay," Harry said slowly. "But we still need lunch."

"All right," she consented. "If I went home now, I'd probably just be doing paperwork and eating mint chocolate chip ice-cream out of a tub."

Harry laughed. He stood up and offered a hand to Hermione.

Harry and Hermione easily found the wide street that led into the center of town. Hermione had her hand tucked into the crook of Harry's arm as they proceeded slowly down the cobblestone road. Stonehouse was a working-class town with recently gentrified townhouses lining both sides of the street, little flowerboxes under each window. As they entered the more commercial area, they passed Muggle establishments selling clothes, groceries, electronics, and liquor. They finally found a bar that was open this early in the afternoon and stepped inside. There were only three other customers inside—a teenage couple and an alcoholic Muggle seated at the bar.

"Two?" a plump woman asked Harry and Hermione as they entered.

"Yes, thank you," said Harry.

"Booth or bar?" she asked, grabbing two menus.

Harry was about to say "booth," when Hermione interjected.

"Bar, please."

Harry smiled slightly as the waitress led the way towards the bar, seating them far away from the drunk at the other end. The woman went to the other side of the counter.

"We have some specials today. Our soup is pumpkin spice and we have a lamb roast with a side of potatoes and collard greens. Would you like anything from the bar?"

"Scotch and soda." Hermione said, grabbing a coaster from the stack by her elbow.

The waitress turned to Harry. "And you, sir?"

"Um—gin and tonic, please." Harry answered.

The waitress left.

"God, Hermione," Harry said teasingly. "Drinking this early? It's only 11:30."

Hermione shrugged. "That special sounded good, didn't it?"

Harry and Hermione spent the rest of their lunch in companionable conversation, delicately skirting any topic vaguely related to the Callahan case. They talked about the children at Hogwarts, Hugo and Lily, and Ginny and Ron. Harry barely noticed the minutes tick by, though his slow inebriation was helping with that. After Harry finished his gin and tonic, he gulped down three beers and a highball. Hermione followed with a whiskey sour and a Rob Roy.

Two hours later, Harry wasn't feeling particularly drunk—the lamb roast he ordered had helped—but Hermione was undeniably tipsy. She was laughing at the most inane things and the waitress was starting to look annoyed. The restaurant's regular clientele was coming in.

Harry paid the check and took Hermione by the arm. She giggled as Harry subtly lifted her over the threshold and they began walking down the street.

"How are you feeling?" Harry asked.

"Fine," she said, wrapping her arm around Harry's waist to steady herself. "We drank to much, didn't we?"

Harry laughed. "I don't know what you're talking about. I feel fine. You on the other hand, miss..."

Hermione giggled again. She stumbled over her own feet and slipped sideways. Harry swung her back towards him, encircling her with his other arm. He pressed her against his chest, steadying her.

"Oops, sorry," she whispered. Harry smiled at her, keeping her against him.

"You need to be careful," he warned her.

"Yessir," she said with an exaggerated slur. "But you're drunk too. Your face is red!"

Indeed, Harry could feel the heat radiating from his face. The cool breeze was doing nothing to relieve that. He looked down at Hermione, her face close to his. She was definitely flushed, and her

eyes were startlingly bright. Still the same brown eyes, but somehow interestingly deeper.

Harry shook his head. "I guess we should perform an aeration spell, shouldn't we?"

"Unf," Hermione said, pushing her face into Harry's sweater.

Harry laughed again. "Yeah...that's probably for the best."

He pulled her into a side alley between two shops. Hermione giggled as Harry dragged her with him and pushed her against the wall.

As Harry pulled out his wand, Hermione groaned. "God, Harry. In this instance you literally are a buzz kill."

"Shut up," Harry chuckled. "I can't carry you down the street, can I?"

"Sure you can, you bastard..." Hermione grumbled.

"Look," Harry said calmly, straightening her cloak on her shoulders. "I won't make it strong, okay? Just enough so you can walk again."

"Fine," Hermione said, straightening up.

Harry pointed his wand at Hermione. She squeezed her eyes closed as a gush of air hit her in the chest. Harry had received an aeration spell several times in his life. It sort of felt like ice water was being poured on your brain, running down until it reached your toes. It diluted the alcohol in the bloodstream.

Hermione shivered against him and then opened her eyes.

"Better?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled slightly, her eyes already more lucid. "Depends on your definition, but sure."

She looked at the odd placement of their bodies and stepped away. Harry replaced his wand and together they stepped back into the street. Hermione was much steadier as they continued to walk down the main thoroughfare in Stonehouse.

"What time is it?" Hermione asked.

"Two."

"Hmmm," Hermione considered. "What are we supposed to do now...with the rest of my day off?"

"I don't know. I doubt there's much to do around here," Harry said as he looked down the street.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed, but she did not offer any suggestions.

They walked several more steps before Harry stopped. "Hermione, I've got an idea."

Hermione turned to him, curious.

"We're actually pretty close to the Welsh border, and that means the Forest of Dean," Harry explained. "Do you want to head over there, just for old time's sake?"

"The Forest of Dean?" Hermione said, not understanding. "You mean the place...wasn't it one of our camping grounds in our seventh year?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "It's the place where we found the Sword of Gryffindor, where Ron found us again."

"Oh," Hermione said, not particularly enthusiastic. "What's there that we need to see?"

"I don't know. The place is just pretty. What else is there to do?"

"I guess that's true," Hermione said slowly. "The weather is getting warmer in any case."

"Okay," Harry said, excited. "Just give me a second to remember what it looks like." Harry closed his eyes and felt Hermione come to his side.

"Okay. Ready," Harry said.

Hermione took his hand.

They landed in a small clearing. The ground was littered with leaves and the sun was shining brightly through the canopy of trees, lending the clearing an ethereal golden glow.

"Ooh," Hermione said. "The Forest of Dean. I wasn't really picturing it before. Yes, I came here with my parents once..." Hermione looked to her right. "Oh, and we set up camp just here?" she asked, turning to Harry.

"Yeah, I think so."

He looked off to the left as Hermione walked to the spot where their tent had stood long ago. Harry kicked a few leaves under his feet. He came to a tree he thought he remembered sitting against once, in much darker days. The trees had been bare then, the ground hard with ice. He didn't even have a wand. Hermione's had been stuffed in his pocket.

Harry put his hand against the trunk. He looked at the trees, which led into a shallow depression. It was there that he had first seen the silver doe, Snape's patronus, which had led him to the Sword. Harry felt himself being pulled forward by some phantom shadow of a memory; he felt as though he were seventeen again, desperate and confused—hoping for something, anything that could change the dire circumstances he was in...

Harry took a few steps forward. "Hermione?" Harry called, his voice cracking slightly.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione said, concern in her voice. She was walking swiftly towards him. She grabbed his arm. "What's wrong?"

Her touch seemed to release Harry from whatever compulsion he was under. He turned to look at her face. "Oh—nothing. Do you want to see the place where Ron and I found the Sword?"

"Sure!" Hermione said with obvious excitement. "You two never actually told me where you found it."

Harry led her down into the trees. He was working off muscle memory to find the exact location. After a few wrong turns, he caught sight of the brilliant surface of a pool ahead of them.

"Oh, wow," Hermione sighed, spotting the pool herself. When she reached the clearing, she spun around in a small circle. "How beautiful."

The entire area was full of light. The sun had turned the pool's surface to molten gold and some species of tree had turned completely yellow, amplifying the effect. The leaves crunched under Harry's feet as he moved forward, watching Hermione.

He followed her to the edge of the pool and they both looked down into its depths. Harry could see some brownish-green kelp swaying at the bottom and a few minnows darting here and there between its shoots. The pool's water was perfectly clear, just as Harry remembered it. He looked up towards the trees, trying to remember how this clearing had looked 19 years ago. At the time, he had been sure someone was watching him just out of his sight as he contemplated his retrieval of the Sword. Now, he felt only tranquil as he stood next to Hermione.

"So, it was just down there?" Hermione asked, looking into the pool.

"Yeah, at the bottom. Snape's patronus led me here and then it disappeared. I saw the sword through the ice and tried to summon it, but that didn't work."

Hermione turned to Harry. "So what did you do?"

"Well, it was strange...something told me I would have to swim to the bottom to get it. So I took off my clothes and went in—"

"Oh, Harry! You didn't!" she cried.

Harry laughed. "It was pretty horrible. I could hardly breathe, it was so cold," Harry said, adding some heroic flourishes. "I was about to reach it when the locket started choking me; it seemed to sense that I was about to get the thing that would destroy it."

"And then?"

"Well, Ron came and pulled me out. He had grabbed the Sword too."

Hermione smiled. "What did Ron say then?"

"Something along the lines of I was insane. I was just shocked and grateful to see him there. Plus, we had the Sword." Harry replied.

Harry turned away from the pond. He looked to his right, and again he felt the same pull dragging him forward. This time, it was towards the rock where Harry had opened Tom Riddle's locket and Ron had smashed it with the Sword of Gryffindor.

"It was over here," Harry said, as he approached the large slab of stone sticking out of the leaf-strewn ground. "This is where Ron stabbed the locket..."

Reaching the rock, Harry knelt down. Harry might have been imagining it, but he thought he saw a thin white line on the rock's surface, perhaps the sort of line made by a slashing sword... He traced the groove with his fingers.

Hermione was beside him. "So Ron stabbed it with the Sword?"

"It wasn't that simple," Harry replied quickly. "Something odd happened before."

Harry sat down on the rock and Hermione lowered herself next to him. "Well, what happened?"

Harry's mind had not thought through the entire episode with the locket. The details were flooding back to him now...His face grew warmer. He looked quickly at Hermione. The sunlight struck her beautifully at this angle, setting her hair aglow. Her cheeks were still slightly flushed, her eyes genuinely curious. Harry felt his hesitation dissipating.

"Um, well...the locket sort of tried to tempt Ron."

"Tempt? How do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"It tried to get Ron not to destroy it. Ron was the one holding the Sword, after all, ready to smash it. Whatever was inside the locket started messing with Ron's head...saying things."

"What sort of things? Could you hear?"

"Yeah, I could. It said really awful things—things like his parents didn't want him or love him, that he was worthless. Then," Harry's mouth seemed to be moving faster than his brain, "it showed him you and me."

"You and me?" Hermione repeated. "Why?"

Harry suddenly felt uncomfortable. His mouth seemed to go dry. "I don't know," he said. "These two smoky versions of us came out of the locket. I think we were goading him, saying that...that you and I were a couple. At some point, we started kissing. That really pissed off Ron and he stabbed the thing. That was it."

Hermione was quiet for a long moment. Harry felt strangely warm, his stomach tight.

"Why didn't either of you tell me about this?" she asked.

Harry didn't know how to answer that question; he was regretting even mentioning the demonic vision that emerged from Riddle's locket.

"I don't know," Harry said again. "It didn't seem important when we got back to the camp. Ron was back and the horcrux was destroyed, what the locket had shown Ron didn't seem important in comparison."

"Yeah, but what it showed him..." Hermione said, confused. "Does that...does that mean he thought something was going on between us?"

Harry shifted slightly. "I'm not sure. Maybe."

Hermione laughed. "But why would he think that? Had we ever done anything that would cause him to think you and I were romantically...inclined?"

Harry sighed, wishing they could drop the topic. "It was probably an irrational fear..."

Hermione was quiet, considering this. "Maybe. I mean...we know Ron has been insecure about you in the past, what with your

success at Quidditch and your inheritance... Then, there was your fight after the Goblet of Fire chose you."

Harry nodded.

"But still, when it comes to you and me, there was no reason for him to think that. No one saw us as more than just friends..."

Harry's mouth seemed to move without his consent.

"I don't know if that's necessarily true," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well there were definitely times when people thought we were a couple, you know? Like when Rita Skeeter's article came out."

"Oh, right," Hermione said, remembering. She was quiet for a moment. "You know, Cho Chang actually came up to me one day and said she didn't like how I was 'monopolizing' your time."

Harry smiled faintly. He would have liked to see that conversation. But Hermione's words reminded him of another example.

"I guess that went both ways, because Krum confronted me once about you. I had to assure him that we were just friends," Harry laughed. "He was very relieved."

"Really?" Hermione looked almost giddy. She was reverting to her fourteen-year-old self. "He never told me that. That's hilarious."

"Yeah," Harry said.

"But, that was just people we were dating...they were bound to jump to conclusions. Though, I wonder why Viktor wouldn't ask Ron too?"

"Maybe because you two were fighting so much?"

Hermione smiled. "Well, I guess that hasn't changed."

"But actually, it was more than just them," Harry started, remembering another instance, "Dumbledore asked me if we were dating in our sixth year. That kind of came out of nowhere."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"That's so odd," Hermione said quietly.

The pair sat quietly for a few minutes, looking at the water. Harry tried to ignore the heat radiating from his face. This conversation seemed to have taken an awkward turn, as so rarely happened in his conversations with Hermione. He cast about for something different to discuss, but then Hermione spoke again.

"I suppose...combined with his insecurities about you and the rumors about us, that could have led to Ron to see us in the locket, right?"

Harry nodded. "It's a fair guess."

"Ron has never mentioned this," she said quietly.

They sat in silence for several more minutes. Now, Harry could feel the warmth radiating off Hermione, her knees touching his. After a moment, she spoke.

"So we snogged right here, Harry?" Her voice was low, almost seductive?

Harry's neck spun around. Hermione was smiling mischievously.

Harry laughed. "Um, yes. I suppose we did. Did I tell you we were both naked?"

"Oh God!" Hermione cried, burying her face in her hands.

Harry laughed again, nudging her gently with his shoulder. When Hermione lifted her face again, it was beet red.

"C'mon, Hermione," Harry chuckled. "It wasn't real, was it? Don't be such a girl about it," he teased.

"I know, I know," Hermione smiled. She tucked her arm through Harry's, her fingers brushing his.

She looked at him for a moment. "You know, I don't think we've ever kissed," she said matter-of-factly.

Harry stared at her; then his eyes flew to her lips. "What?"

"Yeah, I don't think we have, not even on New Year's or anything. No wonder I find this so hard to picture..."

Harry gave her a half-smile. "What? Us going at it naked?"

Hermione giggled. "Yeah. That."

Harry considered her for a moment, or at least stared at her lips for a few more seconds. He wasn't entirely sure why he spoke.

"We could try it now," he said.

Hermione blinked. "What?"

"Well, we never have. What better place than the site of our debauchery?" Harry chuckled, gesturing to the stone beneath them.

Hermione stared at him for a moment, as though trying to determine whether he was serious. Then, her face broke into a wide grin and she laughed.

"Well, when you put it that way, I guess we have to do it!" Hermione said sarcastically.

Harry smiled. "No, we don't have to if you don't want to."

"C'mon, Harry. What are we? Twelve?" she smiled. "We're adults. We can handle one kiss between friends."

"Fine, then," Harry said after a moment. "If you're sure."

"Yeah, yeah. Just do it," Hermione said, giggling again.

They turned slightly to face one another. Hermione's arm was still looped through his, and Harry placed his free hand at her elbow.

Harry looked at her face. "Hermione," he warned. "Don't laugh."

"I won't!" she cried.

Harry couldn't seem to remove the smile from his face.

"Ah, you're the one who's going to laugh," Hermione accused.

"Shut up. Just relax your face."

Hermione closed her eyes. The forest seemed to go quiet, the slow rippling of the pool's surface the only sound. Harry's eyes were drawn to her lips for the third time. They were a deep rose color, bare of any lipstick. To Harry, they were fascinating—innocent and provocative at the same time. They seemed to exert a magnetic pull, drawing him towards her. Slowly, he lowered his lips to hers. They were deliciously soft, far beyond what he could have imagined. He held himself there for a few seconds, memorizing the feel of it. At first, Hermione's lips did not move under his, but as Harry pulled back, her mouth opened slightly.

They stared at each other for a moment, neither of them close to laughing. Her brown eyes were shining, reflecting the gold of the clearing. Yet, her eyes had that same immeasurable depth Harry found so appealing. He watched those eyes look into his emerald ones, and then slowly, her eyes traveled down to his lips.

Harry seized her by the waist, unable to control himself any longer. He brought his mouth down to hers, and this time she relented instantly. Her mouth opened, pliant against his lips. Harry felt feverish and cold at the same time as Hermione slipped her tongue inside his mouth. His own tongue delved past her lips, intensifying the kiss. He placed his free hand under her jaw. Hermione seemed to fall into the kiss, pressing herself against Harry as he directed her movements. Her fingers found their way into his hair.

Then, Hermione moaned against his lips. The sound of her voice was so powerfully seductive that Harry felt himself harden. Harry grunted, determined to completely devour her, to be consumed by the feel and taste of her. He knew things were going too far. He wasn't sure how long the kiss had lasted, but he knew if they didn't break apart now...

Thankfully, Hermione found the strength to pull away. She pushed against his chest and the two separated, breathless.

"Harry! I'm so sorry!"

"Hermione, I—"

Hermione jumped to her feet. "Right. Um. Well...Right." she stammered. Harry stood quickly as well.

"That was..." Harry began.

"Right, that was...we just got carried away. I'm so sorry...should we—?" she said, looking to him.

"Right," Harry nodded, still trying to catch his breath. With the heat of the kiss rapidly dissipating, Harry cast about for something to correct the situation. He glanced at Hermione. He suddenly felt a wave of terror that they had crossed some boundary, that things could not be the same now...

"Are you okay?" Harry asked.

"I'm fine," Hermione said, her eyes wide. "That was...we shouldn't have done that."

"I am so sorry," Harry started again.

Hermione paused, then walked towards him. "No, I am. It's been a very stressful day for both of us—I think we just got carried away. We don't need to worry about it," she said with forced cheeriness. She laughed. "Maybe there's some weird 'erotic aura' left over there that took control of us," she said, pointing to the rock.

Harry laughed uncomfortably. "Right."

"Harry, really," Hermione said, placing a hand on his arm. "Don't worry about it."

Harry nodded, but he couldn't stop his eyes from landing squarely on her reddened lips.

"Right," he said again.

Hermione smiled, tilting her head to one side. She looked satisfied, or at least determined to appear satisfied.

"Um, so should we head back? It's probably close to five now, right?" Hermione asked, surreptitiously straightening her clothes.

Harry looked down at his watch. It was just past five. "Sure, I think I'll check in with the office before I head home."

"Right," Hermione said casually. "I need to stop by Diagon Alley. We're running out of parchment and such.... Besides, I think the shopkeeper at Flourish & Blotts reserved a copy of Gretchen Ohlen's autobiography for me. It's supposed to be amazing."

"Oh," Harry said, vaguely remembering a Swedish witch and scholar Hermione had mentioned before. "That sounds great."

"Yes," Hermione said looking down. "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Harry said. He paused, unsure whether to give her the customary kiss goodbye. Hermione seemed to expect it, however, so Harry leaned down and placed a quick peck on her cheek. "Well, goodbye."

"Bye, Harry," Hermione said, and with that she disappeared.

Harry looked around the quiet clearing, the golden light quickly fading.

"Fuck."

Harry arrived home at nine o'clock. His staff had taken care of all of his instructions when he arrived at the Auror Department at five. So, Harry had sat in his office looking over the interdepartmental quarterly review and several other files. In actuality, he mostly thought about Hermione.

He thought of her lips, how soft and unquestioning they had been under his. The feeling of her pressed against him, the curve of her body under his hands. The golden light reflected in her eyes. The heavy lashes that fell as she looked at his lips. Harry followed these

thoughts without really processing them, not wanting to analyze what it meant...

After he had relived the scene in the forest upwards of fifty times, he started worrying about his relationship with Hermione. In all the years he had known her, there had never been anything but fantastic friends. It had always been clear to Harry that Ron was in love with Hermione. He never thought much about whether she loved him back. He assumed their marriage was proof enough of that. In that reality, there had never been room for a Harry and Hermione that were more than friends. Yet, Harry had to reject that thought as well. He and Hermione had always been more than friends—to say they were simply friends cheapened their relationship.

Yes, Hermione was his friend. But Hermione was a full list of separate identifiers. She was his reference library, his source of advice and perspective, his co-worker, his sister-in-law, his family, his best friend, and his savior on numerous occasions. Perhaps no one else, to maddening effect, seemed to know what Harry was thinking at a given moment than Hermione. They thought alike, of that Harry was certain. He didn't need any more evidence than the half-year they had spent in a tent together. It had always been him and Hermione that chased down any clue that might have led to a new horcrux. Ron had mostly sat in the corner and mumbled about food. Moreover, their time in the tent reflected a pattern throughout their Hogwarts days—Hermione had always been the other half of his brain, usually the half that worked a bit faster.

Considering this, his decision to kiss Hermione was wholly ill advised. He had no idea how Hermione would react to the events in the forest. Sure, she seemed willing to cast it aside as stress, but Harry had a feeling women did not forget these things easily. He certainly couldn't forget it. Again, the same cold wave of panic swallowed Harry. His ruminations on her lips aside, he couldn't be without Hermione as his friend. He simply couldn't. He didn't know anything else. There simply wasn't another way to live, was there?

As Harry climbed the stairs to his and Ginny's room, he saw a light on at the end of the corridor. It was Lily's room. Harry walked towards the strip of light peeking underneath her door and then softly turned the doorknob.

Lily instantly squealed. "DADDY!" she cried.

She launched herself at Harry and he swung her up into his arms. She was getting heavier and it was not as easy as it once was. "Lily!" Harry laughed, letting his attaché slip from his hands and onto the ground. "There's my girl."

"Mum said you weren't going to come home tonight!"

"Well, I came back a bit early sweetie," Harry smiled down at her. "But someone is supposed to be in bed already."

"I was! I was," Lily cried.

"Yeah, then what's all this?" Harry said walking towards the dollhouse Lily had obviously been occupied with.

"I was just playing for a bit," Lily protested. "I was going to go to bed in a bit!"

Harry squatted down, folding his legs under him so he could hold Lily in his lap. She looked at him curiously as her father essentially cradled her like a baby, but she didn't ask any questions. She reached over and grabbed two dolls at random.

They were the wizard dolls Harry had bought her for her last birthday. They were special in that they could change on command: male, female, hair, skin, and eye color, clothes...

"Yeah, and what were you playing?"

"Just house. I made a momma and a you, and then an Aunt Hermione and then an Uncle Ron." Lily answered, stroking the hair of the doll in her hand. It had shiny brown hair with flecks of gold and red. The other hand held a male doll with a shock of red hair.

Harry looked down at the doll versions of Ron and Hermione. Then he kissed Lily's own red hair and pulled the dolls out of her hand.

"That's nice, sweetie," Harry said. "But it really is time for bed. It's a school night. Gimme kiss."

"Fine," she said. Lily kissed Harry softly on the cheek.

Harry scooped her up again and laid her down on her bed. He tucked in the corners and moved to kiss her goodnight.

"Goodnight, Lily bear."

Lily giggled. "Goodnight, papa bear!"

Harry smiled and kissed her on the forehead. He turned to move out of the room.

Ginny was there, leaning against the doorjamb.

Harry placed smile on his face as he moved towards her. He kissed her on the cheek, and the two moved out into the hall.

"You're back early," Ginny said, looping her arm around Harry's waist. "Thought I wouldn't see you until morning?"

"It didn't take as long as expected," Harry said simply.

"And how is Hermione?"

Could Ginny feel the tension in his muscles? "She's fine," Harry said.

Ginny nodded, seemingly satisfied.

While Ginny read in their bedroom, Harry headed down to the kitchen. He removed some of Molly Weasley's casserole and zapped it with a quick heating spell. He ate at the kitchen counter, to jittery to sit down. His mind was back to its usual preoccupation of Hermione's lips. But now that memory was tinged with feelings of guilt. He remembered the versions of Ron and Hermione that Lily had held in her hands—cold and plastic, but matching perfectly. Ron...Ginny. Somewhere in his mind, Harry knew he should have thought about them sooner. But, considering either of them would mean that his kiss with Hermione somehow involved them. He wasn't ready to think about that yet.

Harry spent the rest of the evening in the study, unsuccessfully reading the same files he failed to read in his office. At eleven, he climbed back up the stairs to his and Ginny's room. She was in the bathroom, and Harry quickly undressed to his boxers and undershirt.

He slipped in between the sheets of his bed, ready to appear fast asleep when Ginny emerged.

As Harry listened to the taps running in the next room, he tried to clear his thoughts. He pushed Hermione as far away from his mind as possible. A few minutes later, he heard Ginny close the bathroom door. Harry kept his eyes shut. He could hear her walking around the room, the faint smell of lilac following after her.

Finally, the lights went out and Ginny lay down on the other end of their massive bed. He could hear her placing something on the nightstand, and then she slipped between the sheets. Harry was relieved that there would be no more talking tonight; he needed to get his thoughts in order. However, he soon heard Ginny moving towards him. Her arm draped itself across his chest.

"When are you going into work tomorrow?" Ginny asked, her voice low.

"Usual time."

"Oh, all right," she said. She gently tugged on Harry's shoulder, pulling Harry to his side to face her. "I missed you today, darling."

"Oh," Harry said, not trusting his voice. His face felt immeasurably warm again.

"Yes." She slid a hand under the sheets and grasped Harry.

Harry started and Ginny laughed, using his surprise to take his lips.

Harry felt Ginny's lips press against him, roving and exploring. Out of habit, he opened his mouth and her tongue immediately slipped in side. Harry tried not to draw comparisons, but immediately they were there. Ginny's lips felt sticky with gloss, her mouth flavored with toothpaste. Rather than the golden light of the forest, it was the moon that provided a grayish, silver glow.

Her hand was gently kneading Harry under the sheets. She moaned against his lips and moved her hands to the hem of his shirt. She quickly tugged it off. Then, she swiftly removed her own shift.

"Ginny, I—" Harry said, unsure if he could continue.

Her fingers slid along his torso, ran along his well-defined abs, and then fell below the waistband of his boxers.

"Ginny!" Harry said again.

"Shhh," Ginny chided. Her lips were back on his.

After a moment, Harry could not protest anymore. Ginny's ministrations were beginning to clear his head, which was exactly what he wanted. He flipped her onto her back, and began kissing her neck. He paid attention to her breasts, taking one in between his lips and gently suckling her. His fingers molded the nipple of her other breast into a tight point. Harry moved lower, tracing kisses down to her navel and stopping just above her womanhood.

"Mmm, darling, just do it," Ginny said, her body arching towards his.

Harry slipped his boxers off, positioned himself between her legs, and quickly entered her. Eight inches of himself slid inside, moving in and out. Ginny was squirming beneath him.

"Ahhh, yes," she sighed, as Harry thrust into her. He moved diligently above her, trying to focus on her face and the feeling of being inside of her. However, his thoughts still seemed irrevocably scattered—he simply couldn't concentrate on Ginny's wanton form beneath him. He pounded into her harder, watching as the vibrations of the impact shook her. He took her much more roughly than he normally did, as though he could beat out his conflicting thoughts with every thrust.

Ginny was approaching climax. Harry could feel her walls tightening around his cock and he thrust inside her even more rapidly. She began to shake underneath him as her orgasm overwhelmed her.

"Fuck! Harry!" she cried.

Harry's eyes immediately snapped to her face. He felt his own release.

In that moment, however, Hermione swam to the front of his mind. Without meaning to, Harry imagined that it was Hermione who had

said his name in ecstasy. His name with those soft lips, reddened by his kisses.

Chapter 5: Rapprochement

Harry awoke at his usual time. He felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. For a moment, he could not place the reason for his dismal state. Then, yesterday came flooding back. He looked to his right. Ginny was lying in her usual spot, the blankets huddled on her end of the bed. Harry gingerly extricated himself from the sheets, moving as quietly as possible so as not to wake her.

Harry began to dress himself in the dawn light filtering through the bedroom's enormous bay window. As though placing a gramophone's needle back on a record that had been momentarily paused, Harry's brain returned to its usual fixation of Hermione. The events in the forest, his and Hermione's awkward goodbye, his night with Ginny—all of it swirled in his mind in an unceasing stream of anxiety. Harry shook his head as he brushed his teeth. For someone like Harry, distraction simply could not be his new *modus operandi*.

As Harry moved out of the room, he chanced a glance at Ginny. She was still fast asleep, her slim frame shrouded in the bed sheets. The sunlight was white upon her bare skin. Harry turned away, disgusted with himself.

"Chief?"

Harry looked up at Gwen. "Yes?" he said, agitated.

"Counselor Lakey is here to see you."

"Oh," Harry said. It was just past ten o'clock. Lakey did not have an appointment. "Send him in."

Gwen stepped to the side and Lakey strode in, a smile on his face.

"Mornin' Harry," Lakey greeted, moving closer to grasp Harry's hand. "I was hoping I'd catch you before lunch. I just wanted to give you an update on the Callahan situation."

"Sure," Harry said, gesturing for Lakey to sit. He pushed some files off his desk and looked over at Lakey expectantly.

"I got the report from Anne around six this morning," Lakey said. "She found no evidence of an Imperious Curse. On top of that, no

evidence of an enchantment, a mind-altered state, or even mental distress. Of course, she could only go back to a few hours before the attack, so we have to take her evidence for what it is. There's always the chance that his actions were part of some long-standing plot, but that's highly unlikely."

Harry nodded. It was a frequent point of contention among his Aurors that magical evaluations should be allowed to go back several months before the attack to determine whether foul play in the past could explain a recent offense. Lakey and his legal team had successfully outlawed that proposal, casting it as an extreme invasion of privacy.

"Right," Harry said. "Well, I guess that un-complicates things?"

"Well, it certainly seems to suggest that Callahan is and has been an anti-Muggle bigot for quite some time, a bigot who was apparently very good at hiding it until now. We'll have to develop that in the deposition, of course."

Harry nodded again. "Needless to say, a lot of my Aurors believe he was under the Imperious. When will the results of Anne's evaluation be made public?"

Lakey seemed to understand Harry's concern. Magical evaluations were extremely rare in Britain these days, usually saved for the most heinous offenders. The subjection of Callahan to the treatment would not be well received, Harry was sure.

"Don't worry. We'll add that as an amendment to the arraignment on Saturday. The press usually doesn't look into that sort of documentation. They'll read the Ministry statement and be done with it. Your Aurors probably won't hear about it until the trial begins. At that point, we'll call in every favor we have at the Prophet to downplay the magical evaluation and emphasize the nastiness that is Theo Callahan," Lakey said smugly.

Harry stared at Lakey for a moment, not used to him using such forthright language when it came to press manipulation. Yet, Lakey was one of the best there ever was. His ability to control the public discourse, especially after the fall of Voldemort, was unparalleled. He was the reason half the Muggle/Muggle-born protection laws were on the books.

Harry glanced out the window of his office into the pool of Auror cubicles. He saw several pairs of eyes flick away as he peered through the glass. The atmosphere was still tense in his department, Callahan's absence a gaping hole. All Harry wanted was a few weeks of quiet so that everyone could forget about Callahan...and the woman who would be prosecuting him.

Harry looked down at his hands and said the question that had been on his mind since Lakey walked in. "How's Hermione?"

"Hermione?" Lake said, crossing his legs. "She's fine. She got into the office even earlier than me today. Must have been five in the morning. She'd already marked up Anne's report for my review by the time arrived—she's been exceedingly productive," Lakey chuckled. "And that's saying something since this is Hermione we're talking about."

Harry smiled automatically, but his stomach was sinking. Somehow, he felt disappointed that Hermione was productive? Harry didn't want to think it, but perhaps Hermione couldn't be bothered by what had happened yesterday? It had meant so little to her? ... Harry looked down at his desk. The messy stacks of files provided the damning evidence of his own un-productivity.

"It's the case," Lakey was saying. "I've finally giving her something to run with and she's just taken off. I was worried Callahan was getting to her, but whatever you said to her yesterday must have given her some perspective."

Harry looked at Lakey quickly. "Right, well I'm sure she'll do great. She always does."

There was silence for a few seconds. Lakey seemed to take it as his cue to leave. "Well I'll be going Harry," he said, gathering his things

Lakey looked out the office window, noticing the same wave of eyes flashing away. He smiled. "Harry, if we need to consult about the case in the future, feel free to come over to my office. You'll always get a warm welcome there," Lakey chuckled.

Harry laughed. "All right, take care John."

Lahey strode out of Harry's office and Gwen immediately stepped inside. "Chief, your wife owled. She wanted to remind you that you're hosting the Weasleys tonight and that you should pick up some beer...and some," she flipped through her notes, "some chicken cutlets. She also said she'll be at the office until six so you can start cooking without her if need be."

"Thanks, Gwen," Harry said, feeling anxious all over again as his assistant closed the door.

He had completely forgotten about their Wednesday dinner. He was supposed to be down at the Auror training facility today but had cancelled to finish his paperwork. Now he had to visit Ron at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, pick up food, and then prepare to see Hermione again. In comparison to the latter, all his other tasks seemed manageable.

Harry agitatedly walked through the narrow aisles of Dwendell's Market Haul, a small grocery in the heart of Diagon Alley. Nestled in the crook of Harry's arm was a six-pack of Redstone's Magic Ale as he walked towards the butchery in the back of the store. A few people were staring at him, as often happened to Harry whenever he visited a public place. However, if Harry had been in a state to think about it, he would have realized he was quite a sight: the famous Harry Potter carrying a six-pack of beer and looking about ready to curse the store into oblivion.

Harry got in line behind two gossiping ladies and stared at the magically enchanted knives cutting and filleted large slabs of meat. But, Harry barely took in his surroundings. He was going to see Ron in a few minutes and Harry was determined to figure out what was wrong with himself before then. He definitely could not see Ron in this state. He would go through this whole damn thing logically if it killed him. Thankfully, the line was slow and Harry was able to make some initial progress in his thought process.

First, he had kissed Hermione. The inevitable question was, why?

I don't know.

Expand on that, Harry.

Well, as she said, we never had. I was merely curious, wasn't I?

Why were you curious?

Because I've known her for twenty-six years and in all that time I've never kissed her, except on the cheek.

And that didn't seem right?

Well...it seemed...weird?

Why?

Because I know her so well. We know everything about each other. Shouldn't I know what it's like to kiss her?

But she's your friend—your sister-in-law. Your best friend's wife.

I know, damn it.

So why did you really want to do it? Honestly.

...Her lips were beautiful... In that moment, she was absolutely beautiful.

So you did it out of an attraction to her?

Well...yes. But, it was for that moment.

So you'd never do it again?

.... Never? I mean...I doubt it will come up again...

So you would do it again, if it came up?

...I mean, I wouldn't say no. It's not like the kiss itself was unpleasant. It was...

It seems like you have some attraction towards Hermione, perhaps even feelings of lust?

Lust. I don't know—that's such a strong word. Do I think she's attractive, even stunning? Yes. But that doesn't mean I want to sleep with her. She's my best friend. I can certainly just love her as

my best friend and have some weird lustful feelings for her on the side, can't I? ...I know that doesn't sound good, but lots of men feel that way about their female friends, right?

...Um, let me ask another question: Why did you have sex with Ginny last night?

Well, she sort of started it, didn't she?

But you didn't want to do it.

I know that, but it's not like I can say 'no' to her when she gets going like that. It would be very rude, wouldn't it? She's my wife.

There was another reason you did it though, wasn't there? Something relating to Hermione.

What? The fact that fucking Ginny helped me stop thinking about Hermione? Yes, okay. That's the answer you're looking for. And it worked for a while...I don't regret it.

But you do.

....

Why do you regret it?

...Because I thought of Hermione during it. I thought for a moment...wanted for a moment...for it to be her.

So what does this tell you?

Well, that I have lustful feelings for Hermione...and that they're ruining my life. I can't work and I can't make love to my wife. I've got to buckle down on them or I'll do something really stupid.

Sure, that's one way to see it.

What's the other way?

Well, tell me this—what's your biggest fear right now.

I have a shit load of 'fears' right now! Ginny finding out about the kiss, for starters. Seeing Ron after I've kissed his wife. Not seeing Lily enough. That damned Callahan case...

But what's your biggest fear?

... That Hermione won't want to speak to me.

"Your ticket, sir?"

Harry looked up, startled. He was at the front of the line without noticing how his feet got him there. The butcher stared at Harry as if he were insane. At least he didn't seem to recognize who Harry was. Harry handed him the ticket and his order was ready in about a minute.

Harry walked out the store as confused as he had entered.

Weasley's Wizard Wheezes was drawing closer in Harry's sight as he zigzagged between groups of shoppers and street merchants. He was piecing together a few things in his head.

Yes, he had lusted after Hermione in the forest. The reason he couldn't stop thinking about the incident, however, was only due to the fact that the experience of kissing Hermione (and the subsequent feelings that came with that) was entirely new. It had naturally led Harry to obsess over it. But, at the core, he and Hermione were friends—which meant lustful feelings were not only strange, but dangerous.

Harry nodded to himself as he came to this conclusion. Some part of him knew his reasoning was far too simple, but it was the best he had at the moment. He was a few steps away from the brightly colored windows of Ron's store when he heard a voice call his name, a voice he could have placed anywhere.

"Harry!"

Harry spun around, looking for Hermione.

Fuck. She looks gorgeous again.

Harry stared as Hermione approached him. It looked as though she had been waiting for him, leaning against the wall of the shop directly facing her husband's. Now, she was smiling slightly, wearing a deep purple coat with soft blue gloves. Her hair was loose and caught the September sun, giving her appearance a soft radiance.

"Hermione!" Harry said. Did that come out as a gasp?

"Hey," Hermione said, simply. She was very direct. "I wanted to talk to you for a second. Do you have time to step into a café or something?"

"Um," Harry stammered. He looked down at the bags of groceries in his hands and then to the store that had been his destination. He could think of no other answer than, "yes. Were you waiting for me?"

Hermione smiled sheepishly. "I guess I was. How about Fortescue's? It's just around the corner."

Harry nodded, still staring at her. As he walked beside her, he tried not to let his mind run away with him. What could she want to talk to him about? Was she here to yell at him or something...else?

Hermione requested an outdoor table far away from the street and the two were quickly seated once the hostess realized who Harry and Hermione were. The waitress placed a menu in Harry's hands and he absentmindedly looked through the selection of ice cream sundaes, hot drinks, and pastries. Harry briefly glanced at the name at the top of the menu, Florean Fortescue. He had been killed during Voldemort's second rise and Harry had a brief flash to his third year when the kindly gentleman had given him free sundaes every half hour.

When the waitress had taken their orders (two macchiatos), Hermione finally spoke.

"Harry," she said, a strange look on her face. "I don't know if you've thought much about what happened yesterday...but I've been thinking about it a lot. I think we had better talk about it before things get awkward..."

Harry nodded quickly in agreement. He became hopeful at her words. It was just like Hermione to want to resolve a difficult situation as painlessly as possible.

"I'm still not sure what came over us in the forest, but it obviously wasn't a good idea," Hermione began. Harry could see her twisting her fingers under the wrought-iron table. "I think it was probably a combination of factors that led me to do that. Things have been so stressful at work these past few weeks, and what with the kids leaving for school and Ron being...I don't know... Things can get out of control, right? And you sort of end up doing foolish things. I'm sure you've thought something similar?"

Harry felt himself nodding, but his stomach turned to lead. Kids, work, her husband. These were the reasons she had kissed him. He, on the other hand, had kissed her out of lust. He had taken advantage of her in her weakened state...

The waitress appeared with their drinks and the couple went silent.

"Anyway," Hermione continued as the waitress moved on to the next table, "I just wanted to let you know that I hold none of this against you. You're my best friend. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that. When I was in the office earlier today, I realized that from a practical standpoint, things can't be awkward between us. We have to work together on the Callahan case after all."

Harry nodded again.

"So, what happened yesterday," Hermione concluded, looking down as she slowly stirred her coffee, "was just a one-time thing. And I'm sorry if it caused you any worry..."

There was silence for a long moment, the dim hum of the café pressing against Harry's ears. He tried to think of anything to say in response.... but, somehow he couldn't shake the feeling of profound disappointment. The way she was able to compartmentalize the whole situation, to just treat what had happened as a fluke that could be easily sorted into the "Miscellaneous" file in her brain...Harry wished he could be so detached.

Because that's what Hermione was, detached. He glanced at her quickly. Her eyes reflected the restaurant back at him. Harry tried to pull his disparate thoughts together.

"I didn't cause me any worry," Harry lied quickly. "It was just a one-time thing, like you said. We can forget about it, if you like. I was only worried you were upset with me, and for that I'm really sorry..."

"I'm really sorry too," she interjected. She reached across the table and laid her hand on top of his. "I really am. I won't do something so stupid again."

Harry's brow furrowed at her words. "You weren't exactly the only guilty party, Hermione."

She laughed slightly, removing her hand. A more companionable silence seemed to fall between them. Though Harry would have to process the disappointment he had felt at her words later, but he began to believe that he and Hermione had achieved some sort of rapprochement.

Harry was just thinking of telling Hermione about his conversation with Lakey when he saw Hermione lower her mug from her mouth. A thin line of foam remained on her top lip.

"Hermione," he said, gesturing to her face. "You've got a bit..."

"What? Cream?" she asked. She quickly brushed it away with her tongue.

Harry tried to stop his eyes from flashing to her lips, but he couldn't help it. And he couldn't stop the mental image that came next—him leaning across their small table to take her lips again. "Uh, you got it."

Harry shook his head slightly as Hermione spoke again.

"Harry, can I ask you something? Have you told Ginny about what happened?"

Harry immediately looked up. "No, not at all. Why?"

"No reason. I was just thinking that I really can't tell Ron, you know?" She lowered her voice slightly. "The situation...both of us kissing in the exact same spot where Ron had a vision of us doing just that nineteen years ago, well..."

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling somewhat. "That is the sort of stuff emotional trauma is made of."

Hermione smiled again. "Exactly." She looked relieved to hear him say that.

Determined to change the subject, Harry said, "Lahey came into my office today. Looks like no Imperious Curse?"

"Yeah," Hermione said, stirring her coffee again. "I also spoke with Callahan's counselor around noon. Looks like Callahan will plead guilty."

Harry felt a wave of relief wash through him. "That's good news, isn't it?" he said mildly. "Should make the case easier."

Hermione shrugged. "That or he's looking for a plea bargain. Though, I can't shake the feeling that his counselor wants to bring this to trial..."

"This is the counselor you chose for Callahan, the one who hates Muggle-borns?"

Hermione sighed. "Hates? More like has a strong disposition against, but yes. His name is Edward Bruton. He's upwards of ninety-years old from an old pure-blood family. He never joined Voldemort, but was famously supportive of the anti-Muggle legislation during that time."

Harry considered her for a moment. He wanted to say something reassuring, something about how she could outperform an old racist in her sleep, but his thoughts were interrupted.

A jarringly familiar voice called their names.

"Hermione? Harry?"

They both spun around in their seats. It was Ron. He was carrying two large boxes and looked shocked to see his wife and his best friend sitting in the back of a café together.

He walked towards them, pushing his way through the small tables. Harry felt paralyzed as he watched Ron approach.

"Well, what are you two doing here?" Ron asked, a bemused smile on his face.

"We decided to grab a late lunch, darling," Hermione lied swiftly. "We were just discussing a case both of us have been working on."

"Oh," Ron said, looking between them and then down at the table. "You only had coffee for lunch?"

Hermione laughed, a little forcibly but still believable in Harry's opinion. "No, we just finished. We were just wrapping up with some caffeine. I'm heading back to the office before we head over to Harry's and Ginny's, so I'll need it," she explained.

"Oh right!" Ron said. "Harry, I was supposed to meet you about thirty minutes ago, wasn't I? I'm sorry, mate. The bloke who brings in our Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder couldn't find our address, so I had to hunt him down all over Diagon Alley. Got it though," he said, lifting the boxes slightly.

"Great," Harry said, trying to put a decent smile on his face. He felt extremely warm again.

"Well, I guess I'll head back," Hermione said quickly. She swiftly swallowed the rest of her coffee and stood up. "Thanks for meeting me Harry," she said with genuine gratitude on her face. Turning to Ron she said, "darling, I'll see you at dinner."

She took some money out of her purse (considerably more than was necessary, but they were now supposedly paying for a full lunch) and placed it on the table. She looked meaningfully at Harry before she kissed Ron on the cheek and disappeared. Harry matched Hermione's amount with his own and he and Ron started to move towards the street. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw their waitress stare at the amount of money on the table.

Harry shook his head. Their small act of deception should benefit someone.

All in all, Harry was surprised by his ability to hold a conversation with Ron. Luckily, Ron was particularly chatty tonight and Harry made sure to steer the conversation down the familiar avenues of Quidditch, stocking his shop, and the kids. Hermione and Ginny had not yet arrived and Hugo and Lily were studying, or more likely playing, upstairs.

Harry and Ron were in the kitchen. Ron was peeling ears of corn into a bucket on the floor while Harry set up the chicken. Harry had just placed the first chicken cutlet on the small grill set into their stove when he heard the door open.

"Ron!" Ginny cried, dropping her things in foyer and quickly coming to Ron's side. She embraced her older brother and kissed him on the cheek. She turned to Harry. "Sorry I'm a bit late darling," she said. "My editor wanted me to rework one of the articles by another writer..."

Ron chuckled. "Always correcting others' mistakes..."

Ginny sighed, agreeing. "Well someone has to do it. Half the articles wouldn't be written if I wasn't around," she complained.

Harry smiled slightly at her words as he placed another chicken on the grill. A moment later he felt Ginny's arms wrapping around his torso. A few moonlit memories surfaced in his brain and Harry felt himself extricating himself from her grasp.

"Pepper," he said quickly to her as he moved down the counter.

Ginny didn't seem bothered. "My boys are working hard aren't they?" she said teasingly. "Tell me, what's the theme for tonight?"

"Theme?" Ron said.

Harry laughed. Usually when the girls organized the dinner they magicked up some theme—Arabian nights, Chinese, Continental European. When it came to Harry and Ron, they usually rummaged around in the refrigerator until they found enough food that would feed six people.

"Well, we have corn and we have chicken," Harry said, flipping one piece of chicken with his wand. "What does that tell you?"

Ginny sighed. "That you didn't put any thought into this...but I guess we can tell Hermione...Western?"

Ron chuckled. "She won't give a damn what it is. She's been so busy lately she hardly notices what she's eating. I came home maybe a week ago and she was sitting in the parlor eating out of a tub of ice cream while reading some files."

He laughed and Ginny joined him. Harry, however, felt a mild twinge of anger that he couldn't quite explain. Hermione was the type to focus on her work to the extent that it harmed her health. Thus, food was not particularly important to her. It was something she and Harry shared in common. For their Weasley spouses, however, their mother's cooking had inculcated a sense that food was to be treated very seriously.

Harry was just summoning a large pot when the door slammed again. Hermione walked in looking extremely tired but happy.

"Hey guys," she said cheerily. "What's for dinner?"

"Corn and chicken," Ron answered.

"Oh," Hermione said, puzzled. "...Western?"

The other three broke out into laughter, increasing Hermione's confusion.

"What's so funny?" she said smiling as she propped up her briefcase against the doorjamb and moved inside the kitchen.

"Nothing," Ginny said, moving forward her to embrace her. "We were just settling on a theme, and we're glad you confirmed it."

Ron stood up from his station with the corn and wrapped his arm around Hermione's waist. He was a full head taller than Hermione and stooped down to place a kiss on her temple. She looked distracted.

"Where are the kids," she said.

"Upstairs studying," Harry responded.

"Oh, so playing?" Hermione guessed. "I think I'll go check on them. I'll be right back."

"Oh, c'mon Hermione," Ron called after her as she moved towards the grand staircase. "Just let them alone, will you?"

Hermione didn't answer and soon they heard her feet climbing the stairs towards Lily's room. Harry chuckled.

"I don't know how many times I've said that in my life," Ron said, smiling.

Hermione came down a minute later looking satisfied.

"Were they working?" Ginny asked, sitting next to Ron at the table.

"No, but they are now. I put an anti-procrastination monitor on the door, so I'll know if they act up again."

"God, Hermione," Ron moaned. He was shucking his last ear of corn. "You take all the joy out of life, do you know that? Terrifying kids and all that."

"Shut up," Hermione said quickly. "It's a Wednesday night. What are we supposed to do, just let them neglect their schoolwork? Absolutely not. They can play all they want after dinner."

Ron shrugged, looking unmoved. He stood up and brought the small bucket of corn to Harry who ignited a flame underneath the large pot of water. The water instantly came to a boil and Ron tossed in the shoots of corn.

"So what else do we need?" Ron asked seriously. "Any bread?"

"Yeah, there's some in the pantry," Harry answered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione sit down at the table with Ginny. Hermione picked up one of the cornhusks her husband had left on the table and began flipping it over distractedly.

"How is the case coming, Hermione?" Ginny asked. "Harry told me you two have been really busy?"

"It's going all right," Hermione answered. "The defendant has his arraignment on Saturday. Then we'll take it from there..."

"Oh," Ginny said. After a moment, she asked, "Do you...think he actually did what they're saying about him?"

"I believe he did. It's my job to convince everyone else that he did it too," Hermione said, somewhat curtly.

"Yeah, but Harry's told me what a good Auror he was. Why would he even do something like that?"

"Maybe because he's an anti-Muggle bigot who finally couldn't take it anymore?"

Again, Harry thought he saw Ginny roll her eyes. "C'mon Hermione. You can't accuse everyone who has the slightest preference for wizards of being racist. Wizards simply can't treat Muggles like they are the same as us. They aren't—there's nothing anyone can do about that, unfortunately. To me, it sounds like he is being prosecuted for doing his job."

Harry heard Hermione go silent. He could feel the tension in the air surrounding their conversation. "Slightest preference?" Hermione said scathingly. "Ginny I think it's—"

Ron returned suddenly. "I can't find the bread."

"Ginny, would you show him where it is?" Harry called out in her direction. "I've sort of got my hands full here," he said standing over the grill.

Ginny stood up and passed him, a strange look on her face as she moved towards the pantry.

Harry glanced at Hermione over his shoulder. She was not looking at him. She seemed mesmerized by the leaf of corn in her hands. As Harry was about to turn away, she lifted her face and smiled slightly at him.

He smiled back. He felt compelled to come to her side, say a few words about how convincing the wizarding public to condemn an Auror would be difficult, but she'd win out in the end. But instead, he turned towards the stove as Ginny and Ron returned from the pantry.

Twenty minutes later, the food was ready and Harry set the dining room table for six people. He situated Lily's seat between him and Ginny on one side of the table, while Hermione took the seat directly across from Harry on the other side, with Hugo next to her.

The kids stumbled down the stairs, looking ecstatic to be away from the procrastination monitor. Lily ran towards her mother and wrapped her arms around her waist. Ginny patted Lily's head before she moved to sit down at the table. Next, Lily embraced Hermione, who swooped down and kissed the little girl on the head.

The rest of the dinner passed amiably enough. The kids drove the conversation with their stories of petty injustices and small triumphs at school. Ginny and Ron invariably slipped into talking about Quidditch and Hermione grilled Lily and Hugo on their current studies. Harry just sat listening to both conversations, trying to keep a peaceable expression on his face.

He felt as if he were looking at Hermione too much. He had never thought about how much he looked at her in the past, but now it felt like he couldn't go a few seconds without his eyes flashing to her face. Harry felt that it must be incredibly obvious to everyone at the table what he was doing, but no one seemed to notice anything amiss. He tried to time himself between his glances, but counting the seconds only seemed to heighten his need to look at her.

He couldn't exactly explain what he was trying to find in her face—maybe some assurance that things would be returning to normal between them, or that they shared some secret confidence now? He didn't know.

Harry was about to eat the remainder of his corn when he felt a stocking-ed foot run against his leg. Harry looked up, startled. Hermione was looking back at him.

"Sorry," she mouthed.

Harry nodded quickly. It had been a mistake, Harry thought instantly. She didn't mean...

He refused to follow his thoughts any longer, and a moment later Lily helped distract him from Hermione's wandering foot.

"Daddy," she said, "me and Hugo have to come up with a project by Christmas on our favorite heroes."

"Heroes?" Harry said, distracted.

"Yes," Lily said. "And I wanted to pick you, daddy," she said shyly.

"Oh," Harry said, not liking the sound of this. "Are you supposed to pick someone you know as your hero or any hero?"

"Any hero," Lily answered. "I think most everyone in the class is picking Quidditch players and famous wizards..."

"Oh, then sweetie..." Harry began, trying to think of a way to encourage her to pick someone else. It wasn't that he didn't want to be his daughter's hero. Indeed, the fact that she had thought of him made him very happy, but he didn't want people to think she hadn't given any thought to her project...

Luckily Ron overheard their conversation and stepped in. "Oh can't you be a bit more original, Lily?" Ron said with a sarcastic smile. "Your Uncle Ron is a very famous wizard," he said, physically puffing himself up. "Your Aunt Hermione has her own chocolate frog card," he threw in.

"You all have chocolate frog cards!" Hugo piped up.

"Yeah, all except your Aunt Ginny," Ginny corrected him, teasingly. "Which I've never understood! I was there at the battle of Hogwarts. Don't I deserve a card too?"

"Not everyone at the battle can have their own card, Ginny," Ron said, side-tracked. "Harry, Hermione, and I are the ones who actually destroyed stuff. You just stayed in school..."

"Stayed in school!" Ginny said, somewhat angry. "School was no picnic that year, as you know, Ronald. And tell me this? Who tried to steal the Sword of Gryffindor to save your ass?"

"Ginny," Harry warned, looking at Lily.

"Yeah, a fake sword," Ron returned to his sister.

Ginny shot daggers at him for a moment before saying, "Well, at least I didn't abandon my friends when they needed me."

Ron grimaced. Harry shot a look at Hermione, who returned it. Hugo was staring at his father, not understanding.

Hermione spoke. "Really guys, there's no need to rehash the past. Lily," she said turning to Harry's daughter, "your father is a great choice for a hero, but don't let that stop you from considering who you really want to be your hero. It doesn't have to be your daddy. You can pick anyone you like."

Harry looked at her gratefully.

Lily considered this. "Mmm, okay," she said slowly. "We do have to dress up as our hero, so I don't think I really want to dress up as daddy," she giggled.

Harry smiled.

"Maybe, I'll pick Aunt Hermione?" she offered, looking innocently at Harry.

It was Hermione's turn to look uncomfortable. Harry laughed aloud at the expression on Hermione's face, and then stopped laughing at the expression on Ginny's.

"Well," Harry said, patting Lily on the shoulder. "Just do some thinking about it, sweetie. You've got a long time until Christmas."

Hermione smiled. After a moment she turned to Hugo. "Who are you picking Hugo?"

Hugo looked at her and said quite plainly, "Damien Donovan."

Everyone at the table laughed, breaking the tension. Donovan was a Seeker for the Falmouth Falcons who had recently retired with one of the best records in the League.

"Oh," Ginny said, smiling again. She had interviewed Donovan several times. "I didn't know you liked him so much, Hugo! Let me know when you start your project and I can arrange a little get-together for you both. How does that sound?"

Hugo beamed at his aunt. "Thanks Aunt Ginny!"

By the time they finished dinner it was nearly nine o'clock. Harry went upstairs to open Albus' room so that Hugo could sleep in it until his parents were ready to leave. Ginny took Lily to her own room to get ready for bed.

Harry began descending the grand staircase when he heard Ron and Hermione in a heated conversation. He slowed his steps, listening. They were in the library, just to the left of the staircase.

"You're coming home so late, I'm having to handle everything, Hermione. I've made dinner the last five nights in a row and you know I can't keep Hugo on top of his work..." Ron was saying in a heated whisper.

"Oh, so I guess all those years I made dinner everyday were never a problem until you had to do it yourself?" Hermione said sarcastically.

"That's not what I meant. I just mean you're not pulling your weight at home. Hugo is asking for you all the time. What am I supposed to tell him?"

"Tell him that is mum is very busy with a case and that he should support her when she's working so hard for the family."

There was silence. "How can you support someone that puts work before her family?" Ron asked. Harry came to the bottom of the stairs.

The couple remained silent for another moment before Hermione spoke. Her voice was breaking. "Ron, darling, you don't understand. I'm not choosing that at all. I'm just so...I have so much to deal with, I can't—"

There was some shuffling and then silence. Harry took some quiet steps towards the kitchen but soon heard the door open behind him.

Ron and Hermione emerged and Harry turned to look at them. Hermione's face was red, but she looked unchanged. She smiled when she saw Harry.

"So what are we doing for the rest of the night?" she asked.

Harry smiled, and shrugged slightly. "I don't know. I didn't ask if Ginny had anything planned."

Ron let out an enormous sigh. "Well, if it was up to me—and maybe Ginny too—we could all go back to our house. The Arrows play the Cannons tonight."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well we know how much you're dying to go back and see that..."

At that moment, Ginny appeared at the top of the stairs and swiftly ran down to join them. "Were you leaving? I just put Hugo to bed in Albus' room. Why don't we watch the game or something? I know we don't have a set up like you do Ron, but ours will work well enough, don't you think?"

Ron nodded approvingly at his sister. "I'll manage," he said in faux disappointment.

They moved to the back of the house towards the entertainment room. Harry was somewhat excited to watch a Quidditch game after several months, and followed closely behind the redheaded siblings. They entered a dimly lit room set up like a movie theater. A large projection screen was against the far wall. Ron instantly moved towards the projector, waved his wand, and the game appeared. Ginny and Ron settled themselves in the front row, while Hermione and Harry moved more slowly behind them.

"Can I get anyone something to drink?" Harry offered.

"What have you got?" Ron asked over his shoulder. He was watching a Cannons' chaser fall to ground after a nasty hit by a bludger.

"Wine. Firewhiskey. Beer..." Harry said.

"Beer is good," Ron said.

"Same for me," Ginny called out.

Harry looked towards Hermione.

"I'll come help you," she said quietly.

They moved out the room, neither of them talking as they made their way towards the kitchen. Harry removed two beers from the icebox and pulled a bottle of wine from the rack above the pantry. Harry uncorked the bottle with a flick of his wand and quickly poured a liberal portion of wine into his glass.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, moving towards him.

"It's a claret, 2011."

"Oh, vintage," Hermione giggled. "I'll have some too."

Harry summoned another glass and slowly poured the ruby liquid again. "Hermione," he asked, re-corking the wine. "Are you all right?"

She stared at him for a moment. Then, comprehension seemed to dawn on her face. "I'm guessing you overheard some of my conversation with Ron?"

Harry nodded, slightly uncomfortable. Yet, it wasn't as if he had never heard them argue before. In the early days of Ron and Hermione's marriage, Harry felt like he heard them bicker everyday, often times very loudly...and in public places.

Hermione sighed. "I just...I don't mean to complain about this to you Harry.... ever since I told him about Lakey's job offer, Ron's been very...difficult."

"More difficult than usual?" Harry couldn't help saying.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I suppose so. He just—he doesn't seem to understand that things are getting increasingly stressful for me...I need him to be supportive, but he's just—"

She stopped, looking back at Harry as she slowly swilled her wine. They were both leaning against the counter, their bodies close to one another. "I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't be telling you all this. You don't want to hear it."

"Hermione, I was in the same situation with Ginny eight years ago...before I was Head of the department. I know what that's like..."

Hermione considered him for a moment before she smiled, her eyes filled with the candle light of the darkened kitchen. Harry tried to look away from her eyes, but the depth he loved so much had returned to them and he felt momentarily lost.

"I know you do," she said softly. "You're probably the only person I know who knows what this is like—having success at work, and then having it all fall apart at home. It is...I don't know...not what I expected?"

"Right, you expect them to be glad for you, but all they do is remind you what you're missing and how you've disappointed them?"

"Exactly. I feel horrible about not seeing Hugo, you know that. Sometimes, when I arrive home particularly late, I'll sneak into Hugo's room and just watch him sleep for a few minutes. I really want to wake him up and have him talk to me—well, because I know Ron is just going to be cold towards me..."

Harry nodded. He had experienced the same thing with Ginny. "He shouldn't be like that. You should tell him how much that bothers you. He can see how important your work is right now and he'll try to accommodate that, I'm sure."

Hermione laughed lightly. "Accommodate? When has Ron ever accommodated me? In fact, I think he's starting to resent the fact that I even work at all. There's really no need, you know? The joke shop is doing wonderfully. The new store in Hogsmeade is making Galleons by the second when the students come in. A government salary isn't much in comparison."

Harry nodded slightly, feeling it was best not to mention that Chief Auror was one of the most highly paid positions in the Ministry.

"Well, there are really only two solutions, Hermione." Harry said quietly before he took a sip of his wine. "You either give up some of your work, or you make Ron understand that he has to help you. He's not thick enough to demand you cut back on your work if that's not what you really want."

Hermione looked down. "I hope you're right...I don't want to give up work, especially during a time like this. With this case. But I don't want to make him unhappy either..."

Harry cringed slightly at her words. He seemed to detect a soft lilt in her voice when she said that last sentence, making him feel slightly annoyed. For a moment, Harry wished Hermione would speak of him that way.... Without thinking, he placed an arm around her shoulder.

"It'll be all right, Hermione," he said softly, almost huskily. "He'll understand. He loves you, so he'll understand."

"I think you're right," she said looking into Harry's deep, malachite eyes. "Thanks for your help..." She paused and then slowly raised her head. She placed a soft kiss on his jaw line, just below his lips. Harry felt his head turn involuntarily, so that his lips brushed hers. Instantly, he felt the same dark impulse fly down his spine, shaking him. Her head moved to the crook of his neck and her arms wrapped around his waist. Harry returned the embrace and brought her against his chest. He rested his chin atop her head, holding her for several minutes. He breathed in her soft scent and allowed the warm tingling on his lips to disappear.

Hermione slowly extricated herself from the embrace and picked up her wine glass. "We should get the drinks back to them, shouldn't we?" she asked.

Harry nodded and together they moved back through the darkened house.

Chapter 6: The Snitch

Harry did not see Hermione for several days after that. Though he was more productive at work, he found that distance from her did little to stop his thoughts from turning towards his best friend. However, his work situation was further improved by several days without any developments in the Callahan case. Harry remained hopeful that a few quiet weeks could return things to normal among his ranks.

That said, Harry stepped into his office Saturday afternoon with a feeling of slight trepidation. Right now, Hermione and Lakey were in Gloucester, sitting in a regional Wizengamot courtroom for Callahan's arraignment. Earlier that day, Harry had been distressed to learn from Ginny that the Prophet had sent several reporters to cover the trial.

Harry currently sat in the pool with several of his on-duty Aurors and tried not to think about the arraignment. At the moment, he was receiving a briefing from one of his more trusted Aurors. His name was George Durkheim, a man of small, but stocky, stature. He had dark brown hair and a grizzly face. He had joined the force three years ago and had a cutting intellect.

"...So that was when Regina left to report to the regional council. I was left alone with the Muggle family and drafted a report with them. All that had been stolen were a few family heirlooms and 'round two thousand in Muggle currency."

"Any witnesses?" Harry asked.

"No, Chief. Looks like the thief did everything in the middle of the night. Didn't even wake up the family. Definitely a wizard though; no forced entry on the premises and I cast a few magic revelatory spells, and there was a definite whiff around the family safe and in their parlor."

Harry sighed. "That's the sixth robbery in Bristol this year. Higher than the average. We'll keep an eye on it. Send a memo to Carson Martel and ask him for his personnel preferences—I'm going to send him two more Aurors until the end of the year."

"Yessir," Durkheim said. "Anything else?"

Just then, Harry spied a slim figure making its way towards him from the golden elevators. It was Hermione. She looked anxious. Durkheim followed Harry's eyes, and when he spotted Hermione, he turned back to Harry.

"Right, boss. Well, I'll leave you to it."

Harry watched Hermione's approach, barely noticing Durkheim take his leave.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, taking in Hermione's expression as she grew closer.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure. My office?" Harry said, sliding off Durkheim's cubicle desk.

Hermione nodded curtly.

As soon as Harry closed the door, Hermione spoke. "He pled not guilty, Harry. They lied to us."

"What?" Harry said, confused. "I thought Bruton said he'd plead guilty? How can he even do that? We did *priori incantatem* on his wand. We know he cast those spells—what's more, there was no Imperious Curse involved. What are they playing at?"

"I know. I know," Hermione said quickly. "It makes no sense; Bruton simply doesn't have the evidence for that plea. It has to be some ridiculous scheme for public sympathy. Otherwise, I don't know what he's pulling... But, Harry, there's more."

"What?"

"As I was leaving the courtroom, I stayed behind to answer some questions from the press. One of the reporters from the Prophet asked me what I thought about the magical evaluation."

Harry stared at her, lost for words. He looked down and walked to his desk.

Hermione was exceptionally contrite. "I'm so sorry. There was no way we could have known that the press would look into the arraignment amendments and see Anne's report. Apparently, there were four or five Prophet reporters there alone, so I guess some of them had nothing else to do but rummage through the paperwork...I'm so sorry."

Harry placed his hands on the desk. "Fuck. So, this will be in tomorrow's edition?"

"Most likely," Hermione answered. "The Sunday edition," she said reluctantly.

Harry cursed again—the Sunday Prophet was the most widely circulated edition of the wizarding newspaper.

"Can Lahey do anything?" Harry asked.

"I've already spoken with him. Apparently, the Prophet hasn't been too helpful—they don't seem particularly interested in the facts of the case, as they were released a few days ago."

"What did you say to the Prophet about the evaluation?"

"I said something like 'the extreme circumstances of the case demanded a thorough investigation, which included a magical evaluation...'"

Harry groaned. "Hermione, that's just it! No one yet believes this case is extreme. They think your department is being extreme by prosecuting this man!"

Hermione's temper flared. "Harry, the facts are extreme! Anyone can see that! Muggle legilimency, the Cruciatus, and permanent Obliviation? Who cannot be disgusted by the facts of this case?"

Harry sighed, passing a hand through his hair. "Hermione, I know the facts are extreme, but people haven't internalized what it means to do all that to Muggles. The politics of Muggle rights hasn't reached a point where people fully condemn affronts against them. You know that..."

"All I know is that you shouldn't worry about the politics of anything, Harry Potter," Hermione said furiously. "It's your job to defend the laws of this country, right? That means you defend Muggles from torture by wizards, doesn't it? If you can't carry out your job, then perhaps you had better hand it over to someone who will!"

Harry glared at her for a moment, refusing to give in to the shame Hermione wanted to heap on him. He could tell she was angrier at the situation than at him. "You know I am the most pro-Muggle Auror Chief this department has had in decades. Do you really want to throw out accusations like that?"

Hermione looked chastened, a feat Harry rarely accomplished.

She looked down at her feet. "I know. I'm not blaming you Harry...but you've got to tell people that the evaluation was necessary. They'll trust your opinion..."

Harry gaped at her. "Hermione! I didn't know about the evaluation until five minutes before it happened! That was your and Lakey's decision. Might I remind you that I also put a media blackout on all my Aurors about this case, which includes myself."

Hermione gave him a level look. "I know that Harry. I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think it was necessary. I know this isn't your jurisdiction anymore. There's no reason for me to be in this office right now, besides the fact that I need your help...as a friend."

Harry looked at her, trying to remain angry. "Fine. I'll provide a statement. Two sentences, tops."

"Thank you," Hermione said, relieved.

Five minutes later, Harry and Hermione had composed a carefully crafted statement from the Chief of the Auror Department of the Ministry of Magic.

The Auror Department condemns the actions of ex-Auror Theo Callahan. The extreme nature of his case necessitates that all available means be employed to defend the laws of wizarding Britain.

Signed,

Harry J. Potter

Head of the Department of Aurors

Ministry of Magic

"Could be more forcibly worded..." Hermione mumbled next to Harry, both of them leaning over a small sheaf of parchment. "And you didn't have to put 'wizarding' in front of 'Britain.'"

"Shut it. This is the best you're getting from me."

Hermione smiled before straightening. "Thank you."

Harry smirked, passing a hand through his hair.

"No, I really mean it," she said earnestly. "I owe you. Anything you want, you got it. Need to embezzle some money? I promise my department will turn a blind eye," she said jokingly.

Harry chuckled, handing her the slip of parchment. "You don't owe me anything. Let's just call it even for you saving my ass over the years."

"Hmm, I certainly hope you don't mean every time I saved you ass, because that's a debt I intend to collect very slowly and with interest."

Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing again, despite their difficult situation. Yet, as Hermione collected her things, Harry felt anxious.

"Hermione," Harry called out as she moved towards the door. He walked towards her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Please be careful in how you handle this. One statement from me isn't going to turn the public on your side. You can't expect everyone to have your high morals going into this. Just be...delicate, will you? It'd make me feel better," he threw in.

Hermione smiled at him. "Don't worry. I understand."

She reached for the doorknob behind her.

"But you're wrong on one count," she said, turning. "We don't lower our morals to conform to the public. The public conforms to our morals, even if it's difficult to take at first."

She shut the door before Harry could speak.

Harry arrived home at five o'clock completely exhausted. Before he left the AD, he briefed his Aurors on the news they would hear tomorrow concerning Callahan's arraignment. Harry particularly stressed the need for his Aurors to remain aloof from the media.

Harry also informed them of the magical evaluation. There were a few gasps and murmurs, but once Harry explained the need for the examination, most people began to nod in agreement. Yet, Harry couldn't help noticing the stern looks on the faces of a rather large group of veteran Aurors in the back of the room. It was that small cadre of stony-faced Aurors that worried Harry.

Harry set his attaché down on the foyer table as he heard small feet running down the stairs. Harry looked up just as Lily flew into his arms. Over her scarlet hair, he saw two people emerge from the kitchen—Ron and Ginny.

"Hello, sweetie," Harry said to Lily, placing her back on the ground.

"Daddy! Hugo's here too. He wants to fly in the backyard. Can we go? Please?" Lily squeaked.

"Sure, but turn on the safety mechanism, and no going into the forest," Harry called as Lily ran upstairs to fetch Hugo.

Harry turned towards Ron and Ginny who were standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Hey you," Ginny said softly, coming towards him. She quickly kissed him. "I got word at the Prophet about the arraignment. Did you handle things okay with the Aurors?"

Harry sighed. "Mostly. At least there should be no surprises for them."

"And Hermione?" Ron asked, moving towards him as well.

"She seems to be managing things. Looks like Callahan pleaded not guilty, which is most likely a ploy for public pity..." Harry mumbled. Hermione's rhetoric seemed to rub off on him when she wasn't around.

"Huh," Ginny said, unbelieving. "That's a lot to project on the guy right now, don't you think? He hasn't even been through trial..."

The three moved into the kitchen.

"Well, no. It's pretty clear that Callahan is guilty," Harry stated reasonably. "Priori incantantem and the magical evaluation all point to him as the perpetrator."

Ginny shrugged lightly while Ron moved towards the pantry.

Harry looked towards the table and saw several Weasley Wizard Wheezes' catalogs open on its surface.

Harry was about to ask Ron a random question about catalog design so he wouldn't have to talk anymore when all three of them heard a small 'pop' in the entryway.

Hermione appeared a moment later, looking just as exhausted as Harry. Her hair was more frazzled than usual, her eyes bright.

"Ron," Hermione said moving towards her husband at the counter. "I thought you'd be at home. I was going to fix dinner..."

Ron looked at her derisively. "Hugo had a play-date with Lily."

"Oh, right. Of course," Hermione said, distractedly running a hand through her hair.

As Harry saw Ron roll his eyes, he suddenly felt anger well up inside of him.

"I'm going to go check on the kids," Harry said, dismissing himself.

Harry sat in an armchair on the wide back porch watching Lily and Hugo streak and dive through the air. Foam bludgers were careening around their heads while they passed the Quaffle to one another. The sun was beginning to set behind the small forest in

Harry's backyard, giving the area a purplish glow. The leaves were changing color in earnest now and the wind had a mild chill to it.

He watched Lily pull off a rather complicated maneuver, scoring a goal on a nonexistent Keeper by zooming up from the ground and throwing the ball through the far left hoop. Lily had inherited her parents Quidditch skills. Years of watching her mother play, while her father explained the rules to her in the stands, had made her quite the aficionado. She didn't like to flaunt her knowledge though, as Lily was all about keeping things girly. Yet, Harry could tell she would make the Hogwarts team easily in two or three years' time.

Hugo had also inherited his parents' Quidditch skills—meaning Hermione's nonexistent talent and fear of heights, and Ron's rather shaky control of a broom. When Hugo was younger, Ron had despaired that Hugo was hopeless on the pitch. He used to say that the boy got Hermione's Muggle genes on the flying skills. But now Hugo was starting to resemble his father. He knew how to position himself to be in the right place at the right time, but he lacked the grace and agility of his cousin Lily.

Harry was just thinking how nice it would be to get his Firebolt Mach7 out and join the kids when he heard footsteps behind him. A moment later, someone was dangling a glass of whiskey in front of his face.

Harry moved his eyes upwards from the hand that held the much-needed libation until they landed on Hermione's face.

"Oh, thank you," he said, taking the glass gratefully.

Hermione moved to the chair beside him. "I figured you needed something stronger than wine after what I put you through today."

Harry watched her seat herself in the large wicker armchair next to him. She was holding a glass of scotch on the rocks. They sat in silence for a few moments, watching Lily and Hugo dart around the large field. Lily was giggling as she flew in circles around Hugo, holding the Quaffle out to him teasingly.

"What did you do with my statement?" Harry asked.

"I gave it to Don Holliday, the Ministry Spokesman. I had him contact the Prophet immediately upon receipt. They said they'd run it in tomorrow's paper."

"Good," said Harry, lifting his glass to his lips to take a quick swig.

"Everything should be all right," Hermione said, looking at the field. "There's no need for you to worry."

Harry wanted to tell her that he would worry. He was going to worry as long as he felt that she was in danger. Maybe he could begin to feel marginally better once Callahan was locked up for life in Azkaban. Yet, he stopped himself from saying this—he didn't want to place even more pressure on Hermione. He could tell she was very stressed.

Neither of them spoke as they slowly sipped their drinks and watched the children. The field was gradually dimming as the light changed from light purple, to deep pink, and then into hazy darkness. Harry waved his wand at the outdoor lamps and they immediately ignited.

The sound of two sets of feet became louder from inside the house. Ron and Ginny emerged a moment later, carrying their own drinks.

"Hey guys," Ron said, his eyes on the children. "Thought we'd come join you. Ginny was giving me her advice on the new catalog for the store. She's better at this design stuff than either me or George."

"How is George doing?" Hermione asked.

"He's doing well. It's Roxanne's birthday in less than a month, so he's planning this elaborate gift to send her through the post. I said it would be embarrassing, but after she gets past the explosions, there is a lot of loot down in there that she can share with her friends."

"Ah, the joys of being the daughter of a joke-master," Hermione laughed.

Ginny looked at Hermione. "Speaking of birthdays, yours is less than two weeks away, isn't it Hermione?"

Hermione's face colored slightly.

"Yeah, what do you want us to do for it, darling?" Ron asked, looping his arm around his sister's waist.

Harry watched Hermione, smiling. She seemed to be struggling with the sudden attention.

"Nothing fancy. Just take me out to dinner or something?"

"Sure, we can do that," Ron said simply.

"Yeah, but what do you want, Hermione?" Ginny asked. "Anything we can get you?"

Hermione laughed uncomfortably. "I haven't thought of anything. You don't have to get me presents. I think we're past the age when that's necessary..."

Ron made a retching sound. "Don't ever say that."

The four of them laughed, catching Lily's attention on the darkened field. "Mom? Dad? Do you want to come play too?" she called.

"Darling, it's a bit late for that!" Ginny answered back.

"Aw, c'mon! Please?" Ginny squealed, her small face barely visible in the twilight.

Ginny turned to Harry, who shrugged. "Do you want me to get your broom?" she asked.

"Sure," Harry replied. "You can have the Mach7 if you want."

"Oh, thanks," Ginny said passing back into the house with Ron in tow.

After they left, Harry looked back at Hermione. She had a sour look on her face. "So, thirty-eight years old..."

"Shut up."

A few minutes later, Ron and Ginny returned. Ginny was holding Harry's prototype Firebolt Mach7, which had been lent to him by its

maker, and her own older version of the Firebolt. Ron held the latest generation Comet.

Harry took Ginny's broom and heaved himself out of his armchair feeling tired all over again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione give all three of them a dubious look.

"Not coming along, Hermione?" Ron called out to her as he ran towards the field.

Harry heard Hermione mutter a soft "ha ha ha" under her breath.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny flew into the air to join the children. In one blissful moment, Harry didn't feel tired any longer. He was back in the air—a place he had always felt he belonged. They maneuvered into a loose circle around the kids. Harry waved his wand at the outdoor lamps and they began to glow even brighter.

"So, what were you playing?" Ginny asked Lily and Hugo.

"We were just passing the Quaffle around. There's not much you can do with two people," Lily replied, swinging her legs on her Cleansweep 12.

"Well, we can have a short scrimmage?" Ron suggested. "But there's only five of us. We need Hermione..." Ron laughed.

Ron looked back towards the porch and called out to Hermione. "We need one more player, Hermione! Come and join us, why don't you?"

Harry turned to look at Hermione too. She had on her fuck-you-all face. They all laughed, but surprisingly Hermione got out of her chair.

"Do you still have that one broom? The one that doesn't move much?" she called.

"Yeah, the Silver Arrow?" Harry shouted. "It's in the shed. Should be right behind the door."

Hermione stepped off the porch and walked around to the side of the house.

"Wow. I can't believe she did that," said Ginny smiling.

"This should be hilarious," Ron snickered.

Harry just waited for Hermione to reemerge, which she did a minute later holding an old fashioned broom warily in her hands. She placed the broom on the ground.

"Up!" she said with as much force as possible. The broom did not move. "Up!" she said again, more testily. Still no movement.

"Up you son of a...!" she said, cutting off her last word for the sake of the children.

Luckily, the broom shot upwards into her hands. Hermione looked grimly satisfied. The three adults laughed above her.

She floated shakily towards to them. "I'll play as long as I'm Keeper, and you only get to score through the middle hoop thing."

"Aw, c'mon Hermione!" Ron groaned.

"Those are the conditions. If not, I'm going back down right now," she warned.

"All right, all right," Ginny said laughing. "Those are the rules. Let's split ourselves up."

The strongest players were obviously Harry and Ginny, followed by Ron, Lily, and Hugo. They quickly decided that Hermione should be paired with one of the strong players, which turned out to be Ginny. Given the level of Hermione's ineptitude, she also got Ron on her team. That left Harry with the kids.

Harry herded Lily and Hugo to the other side of the pitch. Hugo wanted to be Keeper, like his mother, and Harry and Lily took up their positions as Chasers. Harry would also play Seeker. For the opposing team: Hermione was Keeper, per her request, with Ron and Ginny as the Chasers. Ginny also played the double-role of Seeker.

Once they released the balls, the game was on. Harry moved forward with Lily. He quickly seized the Quaffle and passed it off to

his daughter. He let her charge ahead towards her mother and uncle. It was beautiful to watch. The small girl controlled her broom perfectly, deflecting Ron's attempt to seize the Quaffle and delicately dodging a foam Bludger. She moved towards Hermione, who was basically sitting inside the middle hoop.

Lily hovered in front of Hermione in an attempt to lure her away from the goal. It worked slightly, though Hermione seemed aware of what Lily was trying to do. Lily faked left and Hermione followed. Ten points.

Harry cheered as Lily made her way back to him. This time Ginny had the ball and she smiled dangerously at Harry.

"Go cover your uncle, Lily," Harry shouted. The redheaded girl streaked off towards Ron and Harry went to shadow Ginny. A moment later, however, a Bludger gave him a soft tap on the back and Harry pretended to fall away. Ginny charged off towards Hugo. Ten points.

The game progressed fairly evenly from then on. Ron and Ginny shouted at Hermione a few times to stop sitting in the hoop, but otherwise there were few problems. Whenever possible, Harry passed the Quaffle to Lily and focused on finding the Snitch. Harry had never much liked playing the position of Chaser. Moreover, he'd rather give Lily the extra practice than improve his own Chasing skills. Hugo was doing decently, blocking just under half of all the attempted goals. At one point, Ron and Ginny double-teamed on Lily and Harry flew to her aid. He shot past all three of them and moved towards Hermione's goal post.

"Lily! Pass!" he shouted. The Quaffle came flying over Ron and Ginny's heads and landed squarely in Harry's arms. He turned and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

He gave her a half-smile. "Sorry about this."

He seized her wrist and swung her to the side. He easily tossed the Quaffle through the center hoop. Ron, Ginny, and the children laughed. Hermione gave Harry a haughty look, which she was still able to accomplish besides being seriously unbalanced on her broom after Harry's maneuver.

Harry gently touched her shoulder, setting her upright. He let his hand linger there slightly longer than necessary. "You're doing good," he whispered to her.

"Shut up," she said again, but she was smiling.

The stars were out now and they were all starting to get hungry. They ordered the kids inside the house to wash up and change clothes while the adults gathered the equipment. Ron collected the small Bludgers and placed them in the crate. Ginny tossed the Quaffle in as well. Finally, the Snitch needed to be found. They all darted about searching for the small flying ball, except Hermione, who stayed floating by the goal posts.

As Ron was saying, "We might as well call it a night and find it tomorrow morning," Harry spied the Snitch hovering by Hermione's head.

With a smile, he streaked towards her. Ginny immediately knew what he was doing and gave chase. Hermione stared in horror as Harry and Ginny shot towards her. Harry watched as comprehension dawned on Hermione's face that she was the intended target. She let out a scream.

"Hermione! Don't move!" Harry shouted.

He and Ginny were shoulder to shoulder and Harry roughly nudged her to send her off course. She pushed him back harder, however, and Harry over compensated.

It was too late for Hermione. As Ginny laughed, turning her head to look at Harry as he corrected himself, she flew headlong into Hermione. The two women went tumbling towards the ground, and Harry immediately darted below them to break their fall. The three of them landed in a tangled heap on the leaves and soft grass.

Harry had the wind knocked out of him as both women landed on top of him—Hermione first, then Ginny. He felt something hard pressing into his stomach.

"Unnh," Harry wheezed.

Ginny was laughing uncontrollably. "Your face, Hermione!" she gasped. "So funny!"

Harry felt himself laughing as well as he began to regain his breath. He slipped a finger between himself and Hermione and retrieved the hard object that had been poking him in the stomach. It was the Snitch. Its wings were beating feebly.

"Hermione?" Ginny was saying now. "Are you all right? We took quite a tumble."

Harry craned his neck to see Hermione face resting atop his chest. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open in a small "oh" of shock. They both stared at her and after a moment, she spoke.

"What the fuck was that?"

Harry and Ginny broke into fresh peals of laughter. Harry looked down at the Snitch held tightly in his hand. No one had noticed he had caught it—or more accurately, that he and Hermione had jointly caught it. Carefully, he slipped the golden ball in Hermione's loose hand, which was pressed against his side. She was too dazed to notice.

Ginny got up and went to meet Ron, who was running towards them. Harry gently lifted Hermione off his chest, pushing her into a sitting position. He kept his hands at her waist as she rubbed her forehead with her free hand.

"Yeah," she said with finality. "That's definitely the last time I'm playing Quidditch."

"Yeah, but look," Harry whispered lightly in her ear, "you caught the Snitch."

"I...what?" Hermione said in confusion. She looked down at her hand, and her face broke into an expression of heart-breaking joy. "I caught—?" she said quietly.

"You did." Harry said.

Hermione looked at him in rapture. He was shocked to see tears forming in the corners of her eyes. "I caught the Snitch?" she asked, smiling from ear to ear.

"Yes."

Hermione jumped to her feet and waved the Snitch wildly above her head. "Hey!" she called. "Look! I caught the Snitch! Ha ha!"

She danced around in a small circle, pressing the small golden ball to her chest.

Ron and Ginny had arrived. They were smiling at her. Ron offered Harry a hand and pulled him to his feet.

"Nice job, Hermione," Ron said, smiling at her.

Hermione ran towards him and kissed him quickly on the cheek. She did the same to Ginny, then Harry. Her hair was a mess and her white button-down shirt had several prominent grass stains on it, but she looked absolutely ecstatic.

She placed the Snitch in her pocket, and without looking back at them, walked off towards the house. "I'm keeping this thing forever," she said.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny watched her go, and then together moved towards the equipment crate.

"Are you going to tell her it's illegal for any player besides the Seeker to catch the Snitch?" Ginny asked.

"Not a chance," Harry said.

They laughed quietly to themselves.

It was amazing what a little whiskey and Quidditch could do to distract Harry from the calm before the storm.

Chapter 7: Pillar Woman

Harry woke up earlier than usual on Sunday morning. His body couldn't seem to let him sleep. He went downstairs and stood by the front door, looking out onto the street. The house was quiet, the view outside utterly still. It was five o'clock.

Harry walked slowly into the kitchen, rewrapping his robe around himself. He moved towards the stove, removing his wand. He placed a kettle on the stove and ignited a flame. The water came to a boil and Harry poured the water into his small coffee maker. Harry stared out of the kitchen window above the sink, looking out into the trees. It was then when he heard the flutter of wings by the front door.

Harry strode into the foyer. A small barn owl with a white face was carrying a thick edition of the Daily Prophet in its beak. Harry removed the paper and placed six knuts in the small pouch tied to the animal's leg. The bird took flight, back into the hazy dawn.

Harry returned to the kitchen, unfurling the paper. It was just below the centerfold in large, black writing.

Ex-Auror Pleads Not Guilty in Muggle Torture Case, Trial Set for Early January

The arraignment of ex-Auror Theo Callahan was held yesterday in the regional Wizengamot court of Gloucester. The expelled Auror pleaded not guilty to Muggle torture, including several counts of unauthorized legilimency, the illegal use of mind Obliviation, and the infliction of the Cruciatus curse on Muggles. About eighty people crammed into the small courtroom in Gloucester to hear Callahan's plea. The trial is set to begin the first week of January 2018.

The Prophet has obtained an exclusive statement from Callahan's counselor, the esteemed Edward Bruton, who retired several years ago but has reemerged in order to defend the embattled ex-Auror.

When asked to explain Callahan's decision to plead not guilty, Counselor Bruton gave this statement: "Unfortunately, I cannot go into the details of the case at this time. However, it is our intention to show that Theo Callahan has committed no crime other than fulfilling his obligations as an Auror with his usual moral courageousness and steadfast dedication. It is the work of an activist Department of

Magical Law Enforcement that has led to the prosecution of this gentleman."

Bruton's comments refer to the recent criticism of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The powerful Ministry agency has been under fire for the perceived aggressiveness of its pro-Muggle/Muggle-born agenda. Headed by noted pro-Muggle activist and scholar, John Lakey, the Department may incite further public discontent over its decision to prosecute Callahan.

When asked for a comment, Hermione Granger, the head prosecutor of Callahan's case, provided this statement: "Magical Law Enforcement is committed to focusing on the facts of this case. The severity of Mr. Callahan's alleged misconduct against a Muggle family should be a concern to every witch and wizard. This tragic incident serves as a reminder of the continued discrimination and mistreatment of Muggles in this country, and the need to eradicate all Muggle intolerance in the wizarding world."

Counselor Granger, renowned for her role in assisting Harry Potter in the second defeat of Lord Voldemort, emphasized the brutality of the attack on a Muggle family on August 29 of this year.

The Muggle family, whose names were released to the public yesterday, suffered severe memory loss due to a high-level Obliviation charm. Two Muggle adults (Walter and Theresa Cameron) were purportedly subjected to the Cruciatus curse while their children (Nicole and Duncan, 15 and 12 respectively) looked on. The Muggle girl is still in a magical coma at St. Mungo's as Healers attempt to re-grow her lost brain matter.

Another point of interest was Callahan's subjugation to a magical evaluation before his arraignment Saturday. This controversial practice was widely used in the late 1990s after the fall of Lord Voldemort. Now, the practice is used on prime offenders, particularly those wizards who are accused of murder, in order to determine whether an Imperious Curse was involved. The use of the procedure on an Auror is unprecedented.

Turn to page 4, CALLAHAN

Harry flipped to the page and continued.

One Auror, who wished to remain anonymous due to a media blackout on the Auror Department, said he did not believe the procedure should have been used on Callahan.

"There have been a lot of restrictions on Aurors who want to use magical evaluations on criminals. But, if the Department of Magical Law Enforcement wants to use it on an Auror, or anyone for that matter, no one seems to make a fuss," the Auror said. "Aurors, who carry out the actual defense of this country, should either be granted the same access to magical evaluations or equal restrictions should be placed on the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

The Auror was asked to comment on the particular use of the procedure on Callahan.

"Theo Callahan is a great man and was an amazing Auror. He is not an anti-Muggle extremist. I respect the judgment of my superiors, but in this case I cannot support the use of a magical evaluation on an Auror. It sets a bad precedent. It could jeopardize the security of our intelligence, and thus the security of wizarding Britain."

When asked who he thought approved the use of a magical evaluation on Callahan, another Auror provided this comment. "It was most likely Lakey. It's never been a secret that he despises the Auror Department. Though, I bet the Chief [Harry Potter] also signed off on the evaluation. It's his best friend, Granger, who will be prosecuting Theo after all."

Harry Potter, the Head of the Auror Department, provided this statement to the Prophet.

"The Auror Department condemns the actions of ex-Auror Theo Callahan. The extreme nature of his case necessitates that all available means be employed to defend the laws of wizarding Britain."

No word has been received as to whether Chief Potter was condoning the use of a magical evaluation on Callahan or if the use of magical evaluations on Aurors will become the new norm at the Ministry. A Department of Magical Law Enforcement spokesperson could not be reached for comment on the proposal of placing restrictions on the Department and its use of the magical evaluations.

For more coverage of the Callahan's case, please see the Prophet's editorial page.

Harry growled to himself. Two of his Aurors had spoken to the press. He had a hunch that the informants could be found in the cadre of Aurors who supported Callahan, but there was no way to be sure.

Harry moved towards the counter, fuming. The faces of the mutinous Aurors ran through his mind. Harry pondered whether he should confront each of them directly or issue a blanket directive that any Auror found talking to the press would be severely punished. After deciding that the latter option might be better, Harry's anger turned to other matters.

His statement to the Prophet did not have the desired effect. For one, it was on page four, which meant fewer people would see that he had condemned Callahan's actions. Second, his statement was framed in such a way that it appeared he only issued it to support Hermione. Harry groaned...he had to admit that might be true. The only reason he wrote it was because she insisted.

Yet, he did support the evaluation. He had had his reservations about performing it, but Callahan had given his consent. Moreover, Anne was a trusted practitioner. She did not include any Auror Department secrets she may have stumbled upon in Callahan's mind in her report. In her twelve years of performing evaluations, she had never spoken to the press or given a single interview. The woman may be creepy, but in Harry's estimation, she was damn near incorruptible. Was it really so bad to use an evaluation on Callahan considering the obscurity of his case?

Last, he was upset with the treatment of Hermione. He couldn't shake the feeling that the Prophet had chosen her most radical quote from the many she had probably given them. Hermione's words inadvertently supported the narrative that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was an activist organization shoving Muggle rights down the public's throat. Sure, Lakey often spoke as if Muggle and Muggle-born rights were the civil rights issue of our time, but those types of cases were a small fraction of Department's work. Mostly, Hermione's department settled petty civil disputes, investigated Ministry corruption, and prosecuted low profile criminals. They were hardly a radical organization. Yet, it was cases like Callahan's that gave the public that impression.

Harry poured his coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. He was re-reading the Aurors' comments when he heard footsteps on the stairs. Ginny rounded the corner. She was wearing a thin white shift and her hair was tied in a low ponytail. Her eyes were half-closed in sleep.

"Hey," she mumbled, looking confused. "You weren't in bed. What're you doing up so early?"

"Reading."

Ginny moved forward, looking between him and the coffee maker. "Yeah? What're you reading?"

"The paper," Harry answered curtly.

Ginny gave him a judgmental look and then moved towards the coffee. "What's wrong with you this morning?"

"This," Harry said caustically. He threw the paper down on the table. "The Callahan story broke, don't you remember?"

Ginny walked slowly up to him and looked down at the headline. She shrugged. "It was bound to happen, wasn't it? They're just reporting the facts."

Harry glared at the paper. "Yeah, but in a way that pushes their own agenda. They're trying to trump up some accusation that Magical Law Enforcement is a radical organization."

"You sound like Hermione."

"Good, then I must be right." Harry said sarcastically.

Ginny looked at him levelly. "Hermione isn't right about everything, Harry. She should be careful in how she spins this case. I've been hearing things at our editorial meetings at the Prophet. Sympathy for Magical Law Enforcement is at an all-time low."

Harry considered this in silence for a moment. "It's fine if they want to criticize the department, but Hermione doesn't deserve that. People seem to forget everything she has done for this country."

Ginny gave him a strange look and then moved behind his chair. She placed her hands on his shoulders, massaging them. "Aren't you patriotic..." she said lightly. "Hermione has done a lot. People won't forget that. But, she'll face a fair amount of criticism as she becomes more prominent in Magical Law Enforcement. Don't worry about her, darling," Ginny said, leaning down and kissing his neck.

Harry looked away. It was the second time he had been told to stop worrying about Hermione. But the steel knot of panic had returned to his stomach, the same knot he had felt when Callahan insulted Hermione in an underground cell in Stonehouse...

"Right, well I'm going to take a shower. I might head into the office 'round ten or so," Harry said, standing up.

"Okay," Ginny said. "Let me know if you're coming back for lunch and I'll fix you something if I'm not called in."

"Fine," Harry said, already moving out of the kitchen. He took the steps two at a time.

Harry felt slightly less anxious after a hot shower. His hunger also began to eclipse his dour mood. Ginny had gone back to sleep and Harry returned to the deserted kitchen to fix a proper breakfast. He went to the refrigerator and removed a carton of eggs. He made four sunny-side up eggs (cholesterol be damned), sprinkled them with pepper, and sandwiched them in between four pieces of whole-wheat toast. He ate his food at the counter and was chewing a pear when something silver shot into his line of sight. It was a patronus—a small Jack Russell terrier. Ron's patronus.

"Harry," Ron's urgent voice said from inside the silver wisps of the canine's form, "can you come to the house quickly? It's Hermione. You need to see this."

All of Harry's muscles seemed to seize inside his skin. He left the pear on his plate, checked for his wand, and immediately disappeared.

He landed in the small foyer of Ron and Hermione's home.

Their house was just as grand as Harry and Ginny's, if slightly more modern. It had slated hardwood floors of grey oak. Natural light flooded through numerous floor-to-ceiling windows and tropical plants dotted strategic corners of the house. The house itself had a studiously clean atmosphere, though it was not unwelcoming—sort of like a well-appointed waiting room in a rich dentist's office. Needless to say, Hermione had dictated most of the terms of decorating the house.

Harry walked forward, looking left into an empty parlor. He passed to the back of the house towards the kitchen. He found Ron and Hermione sitting in the kitchen, the pale morning light harsh upon their backs. Ron was awkwardly patting Hermione's shoulder, and Hermione's small frame was slumped over. For a moment Harry thought she was crying.

They both turned at the sound of his footsteps. Ron looked relieved, but Harry focused on Hermione's face. She too looked relieved upon catching sight of him, but there was something guarded in her face. She looked exceedingly calm.

"Hi, Harry," she said getting up and planting a quick kiss on his cheek. "Ron thought it was necessary, but I didn't want to trouble you this early in the morning..."

As she stood, Harry had a brief moment to take in her appearance, which slightly distracted him from the task at hand. She was wearing a navy blue robe over a short silver nightgown. Her slender, white legs were fully exposed. He looked back at her face.

"What is it?" Harry said, taking charge.

Hermione stepped to the side and Harry looked at the table for the first time. It was covered with envelopes.

"What's this?" Harry said, moving forward. He felt Hermione's arm on his elbow.

"They're just letters," Hermione said calmly.

"Hate mail," Ron corrected, looking worriedly at Harry. "They've been arriving all morning. They all have to do with the Callahan story in the Prophet."

"Honestly," Hermione said, "I expected people to have strong opinions about this case. There's no need to make a fuss about it."

"Are any of them serious?" Harry said, taking Hermione's seat next to Ron.

"I called you when I read this one," Ron said, handing Harry a small white envelope.

Harry took the letter, trying to ignore the tight coiling in his stomach. He slipped out a thin sheaf of parchment and began to read the untidy, heavy scrawl.

to the mudblood in today's paper,

you had a good run, but it is time for you to be put down by those of us who know how to deal with you mudbloods. you aren't a witch and are only in this world because of those fools in the Ministry. I'm not alone in this. you should watch your back. people will be coming for you now.

- a concerned citizen

Harry reread the letter several times, looking for any distinct clues that he could act on. It bordered on a direct death threat, or at least an instigation to violence.

"Is this the only one like this?" Harry asked, his heart in his throat.

"I found another after sending for you," Ron said. "But we haven't been through all the letters yet."

"Right," Harry said, getting up again. "Have you got all the wards and protections up on the house?"

"Of course we do," Hermione said, slightly affronted.

"Yeah, we've always kept them on, Harry," Ron said.

"All right. I'll do a check of the house before I leave, though," Harry said, moving towards their kitchen counter. He paced distractedly in front of them.

After a moment, Ron spoke. "Is there anything else we can do?"

Harry stood still, his head down. "Well, —"

"No," Hermione said forcefully. "No."

"What?" Ron said, confused.

Harry was about to speak when Hermione cut him off again. "It's ridiculous," she said, shaking her head.

"Hermione!" Ron said, raising his voice. "Let Harry speak. This is his area of expertise."

"He wants to give me a security detail," Hermione shot back.

"Oh," Ron said, bewildered. He looked at Harry. "You think it's that serious? You think it would help?"

"I think it would," Harry replied honestly. The moment he read the letter he had decided he would give Hermione a personal security unit. But, to placate Hermione, all he said was, "I'll have to look through the rest of the letters to be sure. Then, I'll make my decision."

"With my consent!" Hermione protested.

"Right," Harry said without looking at her. He moved back to the table and picked up the closest letter.

Hermione stood in the doorway. After a moment, she spoke.

"Look, Harry," she said. "Please don't make a big deal out of this. Like the Prophet said, the trial is not until January. Things will calm down after a couple of days, I promise you. There's no need to inconvenience your Aurors, and me for that matter, with a security detail this far out. If it makes you feel better, I'll take one slightly closer to the court date..."

Harry looked up at her. Behind her stubbornness, he could see the worry in her eyes. She was trying to brave; he expected nothing less from her.

"Okay," Harry said.

Hermione looked relieved.

"I'll read the letters and let you know what I decide," he continued.

Her expression turned sour again. "Somehow, that doesn't make me feel any better," she said petulantly.

She stalked off towards the counter and poured herself some coffee and removed a bagel from inside a plastic container. She stood leaning against the counter, watching Harry and Ron peruse her hate mail. After a moment she sighed.

"I can't stay here and look at you two," she said. "I'm going to get dressed and head into the office. Lakey's probably there and knowing him, he's likely got some mail too. I'll need to speak with him."

Harry looked up on her, unable to keep the concern off his face this time. Hermione seemed to notice.

"Don't worry, Harry," she said with a sarcastic tone. "I'm just apparating there, aren't I? Nothing will happen to me along the way and I'll be perfectly safe. You know how secure the Ministry is...these days."

Harry felt himself smirk at her amendment. He knew exactly how insecure the Ministry could be, having snuck into it on several occasions in his youth. Yet, the Ministry was more secure these days. At least your ID had to be checked upon entry.

Hermione drank the last of her coffee and moved towards the door. "I'll see you two later then?" she said casually.

Ron nodded but Harry stopped her.

"Hermione," Harry said calmly. "I'll probably finish looking through these by noon. Come meet me for lunch in the AD and I can introduce you to your new security escort."

Hermione glared at him. She turned sharply and trudged out into the hallway.

Ron waited for the sound of her footsteps to fade before he spoke. "So she really needs a security detail, you think?"

"I don't want to take any chances. I should have been prepared for this contingency, but things always seem to be moving faster with this case than I can foresee."

Ron gave him a sympathetic look. "Don't worry, mate. The security should help. Hermione won't like it, but I guess it will help us breathe easier." He looked down at the pile of letters. "Are you really going to go through all of these?"

"Every one."

Ron nodded slowly. After a moment he asked, "Did you read the Prophet this morning?"

"Yes."

"Pretty bad," Ron said, looking down. "Especially the editorial section..."

"What?" Harry said, looking up. "I didn't read that part. What did it say?"

Ron slipped out a copy of the Sunday Prophet from underneath the pile of letters. He slid it across the table towards Harry.

"Take a look when you get a moment," Ron said. "It's pretty nasty."

Harry nodded, glancing briefly at the wretched paper before returning his attention to the letters.

"Do you think you need me for this part?" Ron said after a moment. "I'm supposed to meet George in Portsmouth for a Chinese shipment. It was meant to come in yesterday and we wanted to do a quality check before it's trucked off to London. These Personalizable Insulting Fortune Cookies have a short shelf-life for some reason..."

"Sure, go ahead," Harry replied. "I'll let you know of any developments. Would it be all right if I have the rest of Hermione's

mail directed to the AD? You'll still get your personal mail here at the house."

"Oh, okay," Ron said, standing up. He put his hands on his hips and looked briefly at the stack of letters left to be opened. Harry could see the worry in his eyes too. "Thanks Harry, and yeah, let me know about any developments."

"I will," Harry promised. "What about Hugo? Where is he?"

"We sent him to Mum's once the letters started coming in...Hermione didn't want him to see."

Harry nodded. Ron slowly turned and wandered back into the hallway. Harry heard a slight 'pop' and he was left alone.

A moment later, there was a 'tap tap' on the kitchen window. Harry turned his head sharply and saw a large grey owl hovering outside the window. It had four letters wedged inside its beak. Harry stood up, took the letters, and placed them atop the others.

It was then Harry realized his hands were shaking.

By eleven o'clock Harry had gone through every letter at least twice: Forty-seven letters total, three supportive of Hermione and forty-five that constituted hate mail. Ten referred to her death.

Harry laid these last ten letters in front of him. He removed his wand and waved it over the letters until a faint blue glow seemed to surround the parchment of each letter. Harry closed his eyes. It was a point-of-origin spell and as Harry let his wand pass over each envelope, the source of each letter seemed to filter into his brain. Seven from London and its surrounding areas alone. Two from further south. One from Norwich.

Harry sighed. This meant that the post from further away had not arrived yet, which meant more potential death threats to consider.

Harry summoned some parchment and a pen from Hermione's small kitchen desk and quickly scribbled a note to Gwen instructing her to set up a new address for Hermione's mail. Hermione's post would now come to Harry's office.

Then, Harry walked to Ron and Hermione's small conservatory in the back of the house. It was a gorgeous room with high windows and unvarnished wooden beams. English garden plants lined every wall, lending the whole room an earthy and wet smell. There was a large white cage in the back of the conservatory. It held three sleeping owls. Harry removed Pigwidgeon, Ron's tiny Scops owl, from the cage and the bird happily hooted at the sight of Harry. Pig was older now and moved much more slowly. Old age had also rid him of his penchant for flying around ceiling fans. Yet, the small bird was still carrying out his regular post duties. Harry tied the small piece of parchment to his leg.

"Gwendolyn Fuller, Ministry of Magic, Auror Department," Harry whispered. "Take it to her right away. Thank you, Pig."

Pig nibbled Harry's finger for a brief moment before he took flight through the partially open ceiling of the conservatory. Harry watched as Pig disappeared. He sighed and looked around, spotting a small bench. Harry moved towards it and seated himself heavily, placing his head in his hands. He stayed that way for several minutes, waiting for his arms to stop shaking.

He tried to get the words on those ten letters out of his head, but he simply could not. None of them were particularly explicit in terms of details Harry could act on – names, places, dates. They were determinedly obscure, vague threats laced with anti-Muggle and sexist insults.

It reminded Harry of another time Hermione had received hate mail...twenty-two years ago. Yet, this was so much worse than the angry letters Hermione had received when it was believed she was two-timing Harry. So much worse than undiluted bubotuber pus. These were threats against her life...his Hermione's life.

Harry ran his fingers down his face. He glanced at his watch—11:15. Harry returned to the kitchen and placed the ten death threats in one coat pocket. The three letters written in her defense he placed in another. He would give them to Hermione at lunch. She should know that at least some people had bothered to voice their support for her.

Harry looked at the table again. He picked up Ron's copy of the Sunday Prophet and placed it under his arm. Harry glared at the remaining letters. With a flick of his wand they ignited and folded in upon themselves. No residue was left on the table.

After giving Hermione's home a thorough security check, Harry arrived in the Ministry Atrium. It was mostly empty on a Sunday afternoon. He began to walk towards the golden gates of the elevators at the far end of the hall. Security guards saluted him as he passed, but Harry barely noticed them

When Harry strode into the AD, it was 11:45. He moved through the grand solarium that housed was the pool of Auror cubicles and proceeded towards his office. Several Aurors were watching him, no doubt taking Harry's sour expression as confirmation of Harry's anger regarding the Prophet. At this moment, however, Harry couldn't think about that. He had to scrounge up a security detail for Hermione, brief them on her situation, and introduce Hermione to her bodyguards.

Usually, setting up a security detail took a great deal of time and consideration. Harry had gone through the process several times in the past for the Minister of Magic, key members of the Wizengamot, and various department heads. The size of the security force usually depended on the prominence of the individual. The Minister of Magic never went anywhere without a security detail of six highly trained wizards. John Lakey and the other department heads, however, only used security for public events. In Hermione's situation—where there were at least ten threats against her life—she would need constant surveillance by at least two Aurors. Harry knew Hermione would hate it, but until the situation quieted down she would have to deal with it.

Harry was steps away from his office when Gwen called out to him.

"Chief!" Gwen said, walking swiftly towards him down a row of cubicles. "You got a note from Counselor Granger—it arrived an hour or two ago. She says she'll meet you for lunch around noon after she returns from a short errand. I also put in the address change you requested. Should be in effect by tomorrow morning."

Harry growled in frustration. "Write them back. Tell them they have to change it instantly. The post will be arriving at her house

throughout the day. If they refuse to help you, send Kenney or Lao to Counselor Granger's home to collect the rest of the letters. They're on duty right?" Harry said, distracted.

"Yes, sir," Gwen said, taking notes.

"Also, I need to set up a security detail for the Counselor. Call in Durkheim, Burke, and More. I know the first two aren't on duty, but call them in anyway. Tell them it's a direct order."

"Yes, Chief."

Harry stepped into his office, watching as Gwen swung her arm in the air and a golden ball of light flew into the pit of Auror cubicles. It hovered over a desk closer to the elevators and a tall blond wizard immediately stood up. It was Yvain More, a wizard Harry had taken a liking to since the young man's entrance into the AD five years ago.

He was strikingly handsome, which beguiled his somewhat nerdy nature. At twenty-eight his eyes were a deep sapphire and his nose was slightly aquiline. Yet, Harry was most grateful for his mammoth frame. He would be an imposing figure to anyone who wished to harm Hermione.

Yvain was moving quickly down the rows of cubicles now. He stopped before Gwen's desk and she distractedly waved him inside.

"Chief Potter?" Yvain said, looking puzzled. "You called me in?"

"Yeah," Harry said, pulling the letters out from his cloak and placing them on the desk. "Take a seat. We're waiting for a few people."

Yvain tentatively sat on Harry's burgundy leather couch. His eyes scanned the pictures lining the office's wood-paneled walls. Framed copies of the Daily Prophet. A picture of a nineteen year-old Harry during his Auror induction ceremony. Another picture, less than ten years later, of Harry becoming Department Head.

More personal pictures dotted the far wall above Harry's desk. Yvain easily recognized all of the people in these pictures. Yvain had grown up with Harry's face on the front page of the Daily Prophet. Birth announcements for Harry's children were splattered across magazine covers and gushed over in gossip columns. There was not

a wizard alive who did not know who Harry Potter was—his fame had not diminished with age.

As Yvain thought this, he saw a moving photo of an ecstatic Harry holding a small baby boy with dark hair. Another picture showed Harry smiling with a striking redheaded woman. The wind was blowing her Holyhead Harpies Quidditch robes. Immediately below, there was a close-up of Harry with a young boy, who appeared to be a younger version of Harry himself—the same jet-black hair and bottle green eyes. Next to this one, a photo of five children. One tall boy with a mischievous grin, another boy with a quiet smile, and a small red-headed girl with a cherub's face. Flanking them was a small boy with mousy brown hair and an older girl with bushy, auburn hair.

A final picture, the one closest to Harry's desk, was of three individuals. The famous trio. They looked barely older than twenty. Harry's arms were draped over the shoulders of his friends and Yvain could just make out the Auror armband on Harry's left bicep. The two men were laughing uproariously while the woman, whom Yvain recognized as a younger Counselor Granger, smiled at them. He was caught off guard by how beautiful she was.

While Yvain stared at the pictures, Harry rifled through his file cabinet. Soon, the distant sound of a grate sliding open reached their ears. Harry looked up. George Durkheim and a slight witch emerged from the elevators and began walking swiftly in the direction of Harry's office.

"Afternoon," Durkheim said, stepping inside the office and gazing between Harry and Yvain.

The witch to Durkheim's left was Cassiopeia Burke. She was in her mid-twenties and had long black hair that reached down to the small of her back. Heavy lashes overlay her light grey eyes, set into a pale face with full lips. She had entered the force two years ago and Harry had not gotten the chance to get to know her, despite the fact that she was distantly related to the Black family. She was exceeding quiet, bordering on the mysterious, but she had proven her skills in a number of cases in her short time at the AD. Harry knew Hermione would prefer not to have two hulking men follow her around, so Cassiopeia, or Cassy, was a nice alternative.

"George, Cassy," Harry said, "would you both sit down?"

The two took their seats next to Yvain.

"You've no doubt read the paper this morning..." Harry began. "However, this meeting isn't about the quotes in the Prophet article, though it is related. Counselor Granger has received a number of death threats concerning her involvement in the Callahan case and I will be setting up a security detail for her."

Yvain's eyes widened slightly at the mention of death threats. Durkheim looked at the floor, his brow furrowed. Cassy's face remained unchanged.

"I've put in a change of address for Counselor Granger. Her mail will now come to this office. George," Harry said, pushing forward the ten letters, "I would like you to run a thorough examination of these letters. It will be your responsibility to identify any other potential death threats and carry out the proper procedures."

Durkheim nodded, picking up the small stack of letters.

"Yvain, Cassy," Harry continued, "for the time being, I'm placing both of you on a security detail for Counselor Granger. Until I've decided that the threat has subsided, you will be at her side for all of her work outside of the Ministry. This includes all of her public engagements, meetings, and errands."

Yvain was nodding and Cassy stared fixedly at Harry.

"I know it's not the most glamorous work, but both of you are relatively new here. All Aurors are eventually put on a security detail at one time or another."

Harry paused and looked gravely at them. "I don't think I can impress upon you enough the seriousness of this case. The public mood regarding Callahan's case is exceptionally volatile and could easily turn against the public prosecutors, including Her—Ms. Granger. Do you both feel you can competently undertake this task?"

Yvain bobbed his head earnestly. After a moment, Cassy nodded in consent as well. Harry was pleased. He had picked both of these

Aurors because he believed in their skills. Yvain was exceedingly proficient in the defensive arts, earning some of the highest scores on his Auror entrance examination. Cassy was a master of evasion and had a constant awareness of her surroundings. Nothing surprised her, and that was exactly what Harry wanted for Hermione's situation. He could tell that Yvain and Cassy would take Hermione's protection, the protection of Harry Potter's best friend, very seriously.

"Fine," Harry said. "Counselor Granger will be here in a few minutes and we'll get you three better acquainted. In the meantime, I want both of you to go through your files and make sure to pass off any unfinished casework onto another Auror. You can check with Gwen to see which Aurors can take your workload. Understood?"

"Yessir," Yvain said. Cassy nodded in agreement.

The two left and Harry turned to Durkheim.

"George," Harry continued, turning to his friend. "Any mail for Ms. Granger you are to read and report to me any new death threats. Be particularly on the look out for specific details or anything we could take some sort of action on. Understood?"

"Yessir," Durkheim said, nodding gravely.

A moment of silence passed between them.

"Sir?" Durkheim said quietly. "I'm sorry this is happening to her...and to you."

Harry started at the Auror for a moment. Durkheim's words were confusing. Nothing was 'happening' to Harry, per se. Yet, whatever happened to Hermione always seemed to involve Harry as well...

Harry gave the briefest smile. "Thank you."

Durkheim stood up and shut the door softly behind him. Harry looked at his watch. It was 11:55. Hermione would be arriving shortly.

Harry turned his attention to the document in front of him. It was a request for a personal security unit for Hermione. Harry would need

Hermione's signature before Yvain and Cassy could begin their duties.

Harry quickly filled out the paperwork and set it aside. He then looked out of the window of his office and watched as Yvain spoke distractedly with another Auror, probably the one designated to take on Yvain's casework. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw the Daily Prophet resting on the corner of his desk.

Harry picked up loathsome thing and briefly scanned the front page again, his eyes flitting across Ginny's byline on the lead sports story. Harry flipped to the editorial section. There were three editorials—one on an upcoming Quidditch match with Ireland and another calling for renovations at St. Mungo's. It was the last editorial that caught Harry's eye.

Auror Outrage: When Reform Turns to Radicalism

by Howard Banbury

After the second fall of the Dark Lord, we all remember the shock and jubilation that swept through our small world. Wizards were allowed to move about freely and without fear for the first time in years. Voldemort's supporters were tried and sent to Azkaban. The world seemed to be returning to the order so direly missed only a year previously.

Ironically, somewhere in the chaos of restoring our world, a more insidious transformation was taking place—a transformation we are only now beginning to acknowledge. Amidst such happy occurrences as the reconstruction of Hogwarts, the installation of Minister Shacklebolt, and the revamping of an admittedly racist Ministry of Magic, one organization—the Department of Magical Law Enforcement—saw an opportunity to enact dramatic and cavalier reforms on a battle-weary wizarding world.

At first, such provisions as reserving seats for Muggleborns in Slytherin House and allowing Muggle doctors to consult with Healers seemed perfectly benign. Yet, these small changes became the seeds of a pernicious plot to merge the wizarding and Muggle worlds with the end goal of permanently crippling the values of wizard society.

How else can we interpret such remarks as those by leading bleeding heart, Hermione Granger? Granger, who has been assigned the head Ministry prosecutor against ex-Auror, Theo Callahan, personifies the nefarious intentions of Magical Law Enforcement. Speaking after Callahan's arraignment yesterday, Granger emphasized the need to "eradicate all Muggle intolerance in the wizarding world."

Unfortunately, this not the first time Ms. Granger, a Muggle-born, has aligned herself with extremist pro-Muggle positions. Though she has been rightly praised for assisting Harry Potter in the defeat of the Dark Lord, Ms. Granger's political career can hardly be described as "mainstream." Since her Hogwarts days, Granger has been a noted supporter of house-elf liberation. Upon graduation, Granger founded a small national organization called the Society for the Protection of Elfish Welfare. While she relinquished her role upon joining the Ministry, Granger has continued to publicly call for the emancipation of houselves.

Even after joining Magical Law Enforcement, where Granger is considered to be a rising star under the tutelage of John Lakey, her anti-wizard activities did not cease.

Admittedly, Granger has worked for Muggle-born rights within our society. Indeed, she received widespread support for Ministry-funded training classes for the Muggle parents of young witches and wizards and spearheaded an anti-discrimination suit against several wizarding establishments that refused to employ Muggle-borns. Most recently, she has assisted Director Lakey in his efforts to implement an affirmative action policy for Muggle-borns within the Ministry itself.

These efforts are an important part of promoting wizarding unity, and if Granger had left it at that, there likely would not be a problem. However, Granger has proven that this is not her aim. Granger wants nothing less than the full integration of the wizarding and Muggle worlds. Her firm support of wizard-Muggle exchanges and intergovernmental consultations prove this point beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Now, the prosecution of a respected Auror for the alleged torture of a Muggle family (a family that appears to have been extremely uncooperative with Theo Callahan) adds a whole new dimension to

Magical Law Enforcement's efforts to undermine the wizarding order. Simply put, when an Auror cannot adequately carry out his duties for fear of reprisals from Magical Law Enforcement, no witch or wizard is completely safe. Granger and her ilk have shown they are willing to sacrifice wizard safety and security on the altar of tolerance for Muggles.

What Magical Law Enforcement does not understand, however, is that their goals are diametrically opposed to the goals of the vast majority of the wizarding public. Granger, for her part, is chasing a quixotic dream that is no doubt a product of her upbringing. Wizards and Muggles are simply biologically and functionally separate beings, which makes universal tolerance for Muggles incomprehensible. You could no sooner combine dragon's blood with bubotuber puss than combine the wizarding and Muggle worlds.

Yet, if Granger is successful in her dogged pursuit of Muggle rights we may see more than just Aurors targeted. The real horror of the world Granger envisions hinges on the question of where exactly "reform" ends? Perhaps when wizards are forced to intermarry with Muggles? Or when speaking disparagingly of a Muggle is a crime? If this seems fantastical, you have not considered the depth of Magical Law Enforcement's pro-Muggle radicalism.

It is especially heart-wrenching that the woman at the center of the movement to uproot the very foundations of our fragile world should be so intimately linked to our history. Granger, who married into a prominent pureblood family, the Weasleys, is also the best friend of Harry Potter. Tragically, Granger fails to realize that the world her husband and best friend fought to preserve is not her world. Her world is the stuff of dreams while theirs is the stuff of facts—facts firmly rooted on the irreconcilable differences between wizards and Muggles.

Harry stared at the words on the page. His fingers were shaking again, this time out of rage. Harry glanced at the byline—Howard Banbury. He was a prominent conservative columnist at the Prophet. Harry had met with him once or twice at the Prophet's annual Christmas Party with Ginny. The man had never been anything but obsequiously kind to Harry.

As bad as Harry had found the news article regarding Callahan's arraignment, Banbury's editorial was ten times worse. It was

character assassination, at least from Harry's perspective. Harry couldn't fault Banbury's recitation of the facts—Hermione had founded S.P.E.W. at the national level and worked on the Ministry projects Banbury outlined—yet his treatment of the facts was wholly inaccurate. Hermione didn't seek the destruction of the wizarding world in any sense whatsoever. Her efforts were about promoting harmony, not subverting a supposed natural order between wizards and Muggles.

Yet, Harry had to admit that Banbury's editorial was exactly the type of response he predicted Hermione would face. The wizarding public was growing weary of pro-Muggle/Muggle-born reforms. As the horrors of Voldemort's reign faded so too did the urgency surrounding reforms. Hermione's continued prominence in the struggle for Muggle rights put her out of sync with the current state of wizarding politics.

Harry, breathing deeply, shoved the newspaper inside his desk drawer. He would be sure not to greet Banbury at the next Prophet Christmas party, that was certain.

The last lines of Banbury's article—the lines that mentioned Harry and Ron—were particularly repugnant to Harry. Banbury cast Hermione as an interloper, someone who had not fought the same battle Harry had against evil so many years ago. The depiction cheapened Hermione's enormous sacrifice in those horrible days. The truth was, however, that Harry could not have survived without Hermione. Through his six years at Hogwarts, through the months spent on the run, through the final battle...she was the only one who had never left his side. She had kept him alive.

As Harry thought this, he looked down at his watch. It was 12:10. Harry looked anxiously towards the elevators. They remained resolutely still. She was just a little late.

Harry stood up and walked towards the couch. After a moment he sat down, trying to turn his thoughts away from editorials and death threats.

For several minutes, Harry flipped through a memo Gwen had left on his desk—something about upgrades to underage magic monitoring system. He checked his watch again.

12:17.

Harry stood up and poked his head out of his office door.

"Gwen," Harry said. "What time did Counselor Granger say she'd be in?"

"Noon, sir," Gwen replied, scribbling on her ever-present notepad.

"Around noon or at noon?" Harry demanded.

Gwen rifled through the papers on her desk, pulling out a small piece of parchment. "This is what came from her," Gwen said. She began to read. "It says, 'Harry, I have to run a quick errand, but I'll meet you at noon for lunch. See you soon. Hermione.'"

"What errand?" Harry questioned, stepping out of his office.

"I don't know," Gwen said, looking concerned for the first time. "This is all I have from her..."

A low growl rumbled in Harry's throat. Gwen looked startled.

"That's an interdepartmental memo, correct?" Harry said tersely.

"Yessir," Gwen responded quickly. "The letterhead is from Magical Law Enforcement."

"When was it sent?"

Gwen looked at the parchment. "Um," she mumbled, scanning the words.

Harry abruptly seized the paper out of her hands. Gwen's eyes widened at her boss' unprecedented action.

There was no time stamp on the memo. Yet, that was unsurprising since the Ministry was technically closed for the weekend. Harry muttered a spell under his breath, similar to the point-of-origin spell he had used previously. He found that the memo had been sent at 11:00. Harry had still been at Ron and Hermione's house at the time.

Harry looked up from the letter and then out towards the elevators again. Why is she late? A high whine was beginning to echo inside Harry's brain. It made it hard to think.

Gwen was watching Harry's expression with growing concern. "Chief," she said cautiously. "She's barely fifteen minutes late. I'm sure she got sidetracked and is probably on her way?"

Harry was staring at Hermione's fine, looping handwriting. "Right..." he said. "I'll wait in my office."

Again, Harry tried to refocus on the memo he had left on the couch. Yet, at 12:30 he couldn't take it anymore. Harry didn't know why he felt so jumpy. Hermione was an incredibly meticulous and conscientious person. Yet, she wasn't necessarily punctual. He couldn't count the number of times Hermione had been tardy to class because she got distracted in the library. It was perfectly normal for her to a little late...sometimes...right? Yet, Harry couldn't ignore his churning stomach, the cold constriction of his chest.

At 12:31, Harry burst out of his office and walked purposefully towards the elevators. Yvain looked up curiously as Harry passed. He was wondering no doubt why Hermione wasn't there either.

Harry pushed through a door to the left of the elevators, which led him down a vast hallway. To his left and right were the lesser offices of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Department of Intoxicating Substances and the Improper Use of Magic Office. The old Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office had been renamed the Office of Wizard-Muggle Exchange and was the third largest office after the Auror Department and the Head Office of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, where Hermione worked.

Harry rounded a corner and saw handsome gold letters shining above a mahogany archway: Department of Magical Law Enforcement—Head Office.

Harry pushed against this door and it immediately gave way. The anteroom was a large open space full of cubicles, somewhat similar to the AD. In the back, Harry saw a faint light coming from Lakey's office. Harry felt himself running towards it. He passed Hermione's first cubicle, the one she had received when she first joined the

Department. He used to come and eat lunch with her at her small desk and chat with her lawyer friends...

As Harry's footfalls became louder, Harry saw the silhouette of a man stand up. Lakey emerged a moment later, meeting Harry at the door.

"Harry?" Lakey greeted warmly despite his confusion. Lakey was dressed in casual clothing, a pullover sweater on top of his button down shirt. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Lakey's smile faded upon seeing Harry's pale face.

"Harry? What's wrong? Is everything all right?"

"Have you seen Hermione yet today?"

"Why, yes," Lakey said, concerned. He stepped back as Harry moved into his office. It was a fine room with British colonial furniture and high windows. Harry looked distractedly around the office, as though hoping to find Hermione hiding in a corner.

"I saw her this morning," Lakey continued. "It was around 10:30."

"Where did she go after that?"

"She had an errand..." Lakey said, alarm in his voice for the first time. "Harry, what's wrong?" he asked again.

"Nothing...I don't know," Harry replied quickly.

Lakey's brow furrowed as he analyzed Harry's state. Harry was not the kind to become visibly agitated or distressed. He always exuded a calm and deliberate manner—it was part of what made him such an effective Auror Chief. Now, that man seemed far away. Harry's face was white and there was a light sheen of sweat on his brow. A bright spark lit his eyes.

Worried, Lakey told Harry everything he knew. "She said she was going to St. Mungo's to visit the Camerons."

"The who?"

"The Camerons. The Muggle family Callahan attacked?"

"Oh, of course" Harry said. He wanted to feel calmer at Lakey's words. Speaking with a bereaved Muggle family was just the sort of activity Hermione would become distracted by. It would explain her tardiness.

"Harry," Lakey said, frustrated. "What's this about? Why do you look like the world is crashing down?"

Harry tried to control his expression, to reconstruct his usual composed exterior. Harry suddenly felt very silly as he formed the words to explain the situation to Lakey.

"Um," Harry muttered. "She's late for an appointment we had..."

"Well, how late?"

"About a half hour."

Lakey stared at him for a moment before he smiled. "Thirty minutes late, Harry? God, you scared me half to death. Is that all, then?"

"Yeah," Harry said, looking at the ground.

Lakey looked at Harry for another long moment. He seemed to take pity on the jittery young man next to him. "Why don't you take a seat? I can pour you a drink?"

Harry turned and looked at the small bar in Lakey's office. "No, thank you." Harry didn't think he could swallow anything in that moment—his stomach was still flighty.

"So, you think she's probably just running late with the Camerons?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"I'm sure she is," Lakey assured him. Lakey moved towards the bar anyway and removed the stopper from a crystal decanter. "She's visited them several times and seems to have taken a strong liking to them..."

Harry began edging towards the door. "Well, I guess I'll go back to the AD and wait for her then."

Lakey turned. "Harry, sit down. When she gets back, she'll find you soon enough."

Harry stopped, wondering if he could just bolt and leave Lakey standing there. He thought better of it and slowly moved towards the chair in front of Lakey's desk. He lowered himself onto its red velvet cushion.

Lakey returned with two cognacs. Harry looked away, but Lakey pushed it into his hand. "It looks like you need it, Harry."

Lakey sat down behind his desk and took a quick swig.

Harry looked down at the glass in his hands. "You know," Harry said eagerly, "I could just run over to St. Mungo's and bring her back here..."

Harry stopped speaking at the judgmental look on Lakey's face.

"What's wrong with you this morning?" Lakey said, smiling slightly. "I'm starting to think this case is affecting you more than it is Hermione."

Harry looked down at his drink again. There was silence for a moment.

"Harry," Lakey said calmly, "I'm guessing this reaction is because of today's Prophet?"

Harry didn't respond, so Lakey continued.

"Hermione told me about the death threats. She also said you'd be giving her a security detail.... That's the right thing to do, Harry."

Harry nodded sullenly.

"I've received quite a few death threats in my career," Lakey said casually. "And of course, you've gotten many yourself... even if we overlook the fact that Voldemort was after you for seventeen years," Lakey chuckled. "Hermione's been lucky enough to avoid them until now."

Harry nodded again.

"Harry," Lakey said seriously, "I know how much Hermione means to you..."

Harry's eyes flashed to Lakey's face.

"But, you can't let these sort of things distract you, right?" Lakey continued. "Public officials get death threats. That's the way things are. I've told you before that as Hermione becomes more prominent in this department she'll become a target for criticism. You can't expect the rest of the world to care about her or understand her the way you and I do."

Harry couldn't meet Lakey's eyes. His words made sense and for a moment Harry could see that he was overreacting, that he was behaving foolishly. He would have to treat the threats against Hermione the same way he treated threats against anyone in the Ministry—analyze the risk and deploy a proper response. It was simple.

Lakey was still speaking. "The articles in the Prophet today were rubbish. Most of the wizarding public knows that. The Prophet is trying to gin up a controversy when there really isn't one. Yet, the loudest voices will always make themselves heard, won't they? Just remember that the people who wrote Hermione today are a very small fraction of the population."

"Right," Harry said, finally speaking. "I know. Thank you."

Lakey nodded, looking satisfied. As he was taking another sip from his cognac there was a loud sound from the corner of the office.

Briiiinnng. Briiiinnng.

"What is that?" Harry said, alarmed. His modicum of calm instantly vanished.

Lakey had spilt a bit of cognac on his chin and was quickly wiping it up. "Um...it's a telephone."

"A telephone?" Harry said, raising his voice. He stood up.

"Yes," Lakey said. "You know, it's one of those Muggle contraptions that lets you speak to people through the wires..."

"I know what a telephone is!" Harry shouted. "Why do you have one?"

"It's for talking to some Muggle contacts, Harry." Lakey said, standing up. "You know, sometimes I have to speak with the Muggle Minister of Justice..."

"Well, aren't you going to pick it up?" Harry yelled. The phone was still ringing incessantly.

"Oh, of course," Lakey said absently, setting down his drink.

Lakey walked to the corner, Harry's eyes on his back. He picked up the receiver and held it awkwardly to his ear.

"Hello? Hello?" Lakey said, his voice louder than necessary. "This is Director Lakey."

There was silence as Lakey listened. Harry felt his feet moving beneath him. He came to Lakey's side.

"Yes..." Lakey said. "Yes, I'm John Lakey...."

Harry stared as Lakey's face grew pale, and then paler.

"Yes, I know her...."

Harry strained to hear the voice on the other end, yet all he heard was a faint mumbling.

"Wait, what?" Lakey shouted, alarmed. "What now? Say that again?"

Lakey's eyes flashed to Harry. Harry stared back at him, his heart lodged his throat.

"Yes, yes. I see. Where is this now? Is she alive? Is she all right?"

Harry wanted to rip the receiver out of Lakey's hands.

"All right, thank you." Lakey said at last. "I'll be right over."

Lakey hung up the phone.

"Who was that? What's going on?" Harry demanded his voice tinged with the panic he had been suppressing all day.

"That was a Muggle doctor. Hermione's been admitted to a hospital for some sort of injury. They found this telephone number in her purse. They said it was the only contact number they could find...."

"Injury?" Harry shouted, agonized. "What's happened to her?"

"They said it was a head trauma and that I should come over immediately...bring her kin..."

The high whine in the back of Harry's head had reached a fevered pitched. "Which hospital?"

"The Royal London Hospital."

Harry glanced briefly at Lakey. The older man's eyes were growing increasingly bright, like he was on the verge of tears. Harry couldn't stand to think what that expression meant.

"John," Harry commanded. "I want you to go to St. Mungo's and tell them Hermione is on her way. I'll go this Muggle hospital and bring her there. Got it?"

Lakey nodded.

Harry didn't wait another second. He turned on his heel and ran out of the room, darted down an aisle of cubicles, and charged into the hallway, sliding along the marble floor. As he neared the elevators, the Auror Department came into view.

"George!" Harry cried as he punched the button to summon the lift. "George! Come here now!"

The few Aurors in the room turned to stare at Harry. Luckily, Harry saw Durkheim running towards him just as the lift opened.

"You're coming with me," Harry said tersely. As they both stepped into the elevator and the gold gates closed in front of them Harry said, "Hermione's in the Royal London Hospital."

Durkheim nodded, blessedly not asking for an explanation.

The lift came to a stop at the Atrium and Harry and Durkheim disappeared.

Harry found himself standing on a crowded street corner. A large blue glass building stood immediately in front of him. Durkheim was at his side.

"This is it," Harry said, storming through the crowd. Durkheim was at his heels as they passed under a wide glass awning with the words ROYAL LONDON HOSPITAL emblazoned on the exterior.

The reception area was bustling with Muggle families. Nurses and doctors were walking through doors marked 'Restricted Access.' In the distance, there was a sunlit lobby that echoed with the cries of children, mumbled conversations, and the splash of water from a decorative fountain. Harry pushed his way to the information desk, a few indignant cries following in his wake.

The woman behind the desk was an elderly black woman. She looked unmoved at Harry's sudden arrival and distraught appearance.

"Please, is there a Hermione Granger admitted here?" Harry demanded, his voice shaky. "Perhaps in your emergency area?"

The woman began to type on a board with little letters on it. She stared at something Harry dimly recognized as a computer.

"There's no Granger here, sir. Could you spell the first name for me, please?"

"Yes, it's H-E-R-M-I-O-N-E," Harry said breathlessly.

A few seconds. "We have a Hermione Weasley admitted in the emergency care unit."

"Yes, that's her."

"Are you her husband?"

"Yes."

"All right, let me page a nurse to bring you to her room."

"Thank you," Harry said earnestly, watching as the woman picked up a phone and spoke a few words into the receiver. Harry could feel Durkheim staring at him.

"Now, go wait over by that door sir," the woman said pointing to her right. "Someone will be right out for you."

Harry and Durkheim moved in the direction she indicated. Harry dug his hands into his pockets and looked down at the floor. He began pacing agitatedly, trying to block out the noise of pleasant conversations and laughing children reverberating inside the lobby area.

A moment later a young blond woman in pink scrubs pushed open two swinging double doors. She looked quickly around and spotted Harry and Durkheim. She had a small smile on her face as she approached.

"You're here for Mrs. Weasley?" she guessed.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Please follow me," she said.

Harry and Durkheim began to follow but the nurse stopped them. "I'm sorry. Who is this?" she asked Harry, referring to Durkheim.

"He's my...colleague," Harry replied honestly.

"I'm sorry, only family is allowed right now."

"No, ma'am," Harry said quickly. "I need him with me. Please?"

The woman looked like she was about to refuse but something in Harry's face seemed to affect her. Her voice grew gentle. "All right. This way please."

Harry followed the woman through a long corridor. Doctors were passing up and down the hallway reading metal clipboards. Nurses stood behind large counters, muttering to each other. Harry tried not to look inside the patients' rooms. He was overwhelmed by the sound and smell of this place. There was a strong whiff of rubbing alcohol. Harry had never been inside a Muggle hospital before. The Dursleys hadn't been keen on promoting Harry's medical wellbeing. Now, it was like being in a foreign country. Nothing was comprehensible.

Moreover, the hospital had a completely different atmosphere than St. Mungo's. In St. Mungo's, there was an optimistic, even carefree, aura that permeated the walls. Here the air was heavy, serious. If Harry had had time to think about it, he would have realized that the difference was due to the fact that people rarely died in St. Mungo's.

All too soon, the nurse had stopped outside a room with a closed door. Room 466.

"Wait here," the nurse said. "I'll call your wife's doctor."

The woman disappeared behind a corner and Harry turned slightly to face the room. He wondered if Hermione was behind that door. Horrible questions rose to the surface of Harry's jumbled mind—Is she alive? Is she dead? What will I do if she is? She can't be dead. She can't be.

A moment later a tall Indian doctor rounded the corner, disrupting Harry's thoughts. The doctor was wearing deep turquoise scrubs and a cloth hairnet.

"Hello," he said to Harry and Durkheim. "I'm Amar Srinivasan, Hermione's doctor." He held out his hand.

"Can I see her?" Harry demanded, his voice tight.

The doctor looked down at his clipboard. "You are Hermione's husband?" he asked.

"Yes," Harry said without hesitation.

"You're...Ronald Weasley?"

Harry growled in frustration.

"I'm Ronald Weasley, damn it! Now, let me see my wife!" Harry shouted.

"All right, Mr. Weasley," the doctor said calmly. "First, let me inform you about the situation. Hermione suffered a rather serious head trauma. There were some rather large, but mostly superficial, lacerations on her head. We stitched her up as best we could but she is currently still unconscious as we have her on a heavy dose of painkillers. She won't be able to interact with you as a result."

Harry nodded. His throat seemed to be closing up.

"All right, I'll take you in now."

The doctor pushed open the door. The room was dimly lit, one lamp giving off a soft glow in the corner. Hermione was lying on the only bed in the room. In all his life, Harry had never seen her look so small and fragile as she did then. The air seemed to leave his lungs.

Harry edged towards her bed, as though in a trance. Her face was turned away from him. Despite the tight, clean bandages wrapped around her head, Harry could tell she was missing large portions of her hair. The doctors had likely shaved it off for easier access to her wounds.

Dr. Srinivasan spoke.

"I don't know if you've been told how this happened?" he said softly.

"No we haven't," Durkheim answered for Harry.

Harry heard the doctor sigh. "Well, it was a very odd situation. It seems your wife was walking along a deserted street not five blocks from here. Then, it appears that she was hit with a brick..."

"A what?" Harry said, spinning on his heel.

"A brick. She was hit with a brick."

"What?" Harry sputtered again.

"Yes, someone threw a brick at her, and from some distance, judging by the contusion on the right side of her head. But it wasn't so much the brick that did the damage. After all, your head naturally moves with a blow like that. When she fell and smacked her head on the concrete...that did the most damage. She was instantly knocked unconscious. A young college couple found her a few minutes later lying on the street. They immediately called an ambulance and she was taken here."

Harry wasn't sure if he wanted to hear any more, but the doctor continued.

"We took her to the emergency room and analyzed the trauma. Initially, we thought there might be some brain swelling so we removed part of her skull. It's not as scary as it sounds," the doctor said quickly, "and we were able to replace it after a few minutes once we determined there was minimal swelling. The rest was simply stitching up the lacerations on her scalp and on the side of her face. When she wakes up, we can provide a better answer as to whether there has been any loss in functionality."

"Loss in functionality?" Harry repeated, his voice a whisper.

"That would be an unlikely outcome," Dr. Srinivasan said gently.

There was silence for a moment, Hermione's soft breathing filling the room. The sound of it was slightly heartening for Harry. A moment later, there was a soft knock at the door and two nurses slipped inside, including the one who had escorted Harry to Hermione's room. Srinivasan glanced at them before turning back to Harry—they undoubtedly needed the doctor for another case.

"The police are talking to the couple that found her," the doctor said quickly. "We've also told them that you are here, so they'll likely have a few questions for you."

"The police are here?" Harry said.

"Um, yes," Dr. Srinivasan said awkwardly. "The police could give you a better explanation about this, but it looks like this incident was some sort of intentional assault. At least, that's what the evidence would suggest..."

"Evidence?" Harry questioned.

Dr. Srinivasan stepped to the side, revealing a small medical table. On it were several items inside plastic bags.

The doctor gestured to the table. "These were taken from the scene."

Harry moved towards the table with Durkheim.

As Harry drew closer, he felt bile rise in his throat. The clothes Hermione had been wearing were inside one bag. They were completely soaked in blood, her light purple blouse now a deep, hideous crimson. Next to it was Hermione's small leather purse, also splattered with blood. Finally, one bag contained a massive stone brick, the kind of brick you might find strewn about on a construction site. Dr. Srinivasan carefully picked up this last bag.

"This is what was thrown at your wife," he said cautiously, watching Harry's face. "The reason the police think it's an intentional assault is because there's something written on this..."

The doctor held the brick into the light. Harry leaned in closer. He could make out two words set into the face of the brick.

MUGGLE CUNT

The words were written in neat capital letters and appeared to be burned into the surface. It was the work of a spell.

"I don't know what that first word means, but obviously the second suggests that this was something deliberate..." Srinivasan said sadly. He laid the brick back onto the table while Harry and Durkheim shared a meaningful glance.

Harry stared at the brick a half-second longer, trying to control his voice before he spoke again.

"What's the prognosis?"

"She should come out of the anesthesia by this evening. We'll run some neurological tests on her, including an MRI if necessary. If she

responds well to commands, has bodily functionality, and speaks clearly, then we are likely out of the woods on this one. But, there's every reason to believe she will make a quick and complete recovery."

Harry looked at the ground, nodding. The two nurses shifted impatiently by the door.

"Well, I can leave you here with her for a few minutes. You should probably contact any other relatives she has in the area..." the doctor advised, turning away slightly.

Harry gripped the doctor's forearms with his hands. The movement startled Srinivasan but he met Harry's firm gaze with a slightly puzzled expression.

"I would like to thank you for everything you've done," Harry said earnestly, pouring all of his relief and gratitude into these few words. Srinivasan was smiling and nodding. "And I want you to know," Harry continued. "I am sorry about this."

The doctor barely had time to look confused.

"Stupefy!" Harry whispered.

Harry gripped the doctor tightly, helping ease his fall onto the floor. In the corner of his eye, Harry saw Durkheim stun the two nurses. They instantly collapsed onto the floor as well, legs tangling together.

"Lock the door," Harry commanded.

Durkheim flicked his wand and there was a satisfying click. Durkheim also cast an anti-Muggle ward on the door before he turned to Harry. Harry had returned to Hermione's bedside.

"Chief?" Durkheim said.

"We're going to split up," Harry said, thinking quickly. "I'll take her to St. Mungo's. You'll need to collect the evidence on the table and bring it back to the AD. Before you leave, Oblivate the doctor and nurses. You'll also have to Oblivate the police officers and the couple that found her. That should probably be sufficient..."

Harry leaned down and pulled Hermione's chart out of Dr. Srinivasan's hand. He scanned the document and decided he would take it to St. Mungo's, in case it could help the Healers.

"Sound good?" Harry said, tucking the chart under his arm.

"Yessir," Durkheim replied. He was already bending over the blonde nurse, erasing her memory.

Harry turned his attention back to Hermione. Her breath was coming in short inhalations, her chest rising and falling under a thin, white sheet. Again, Harry was struck by how fragile she appeared—as if a puff of wind could cripple her. Underneath the shock, horror, and rage that currently clouded Harry's mind, he was captivated by her. He so rarely saw Hermione truly vulnerable.

As gently as he could, as though she might turn to ash in his arms, Harry raised Hermione out of the bed. He did his best to cradle her bandaged head against his chest. It may have been the adrenaline in his veins, but Hermione felt weightless—a pale porcelain bundle in his arms.

Harry turned slowly to face Durkheim.

"George," Harry said.

Durkheim looked up expectantly.

"Before you wipe the memories of the couple, get their names and address, please? I'd like to thank them."

Durkheim nodded, understanding.

With that, Harry gently adjusted Hermione in his arms. A soft murmur escaped her lips at his movement. Harry focused his mind on the lobby of St. Mungo's. They disappeared.

A split second later, Harry stood in the busy lobby of another hospital. Three Healers, followed closely by Lakey, were rushing towards him. Upon reaching Harry and Hermione, the Healers were began speaking with one another in a rapid jargon Harry did not completely understand. They removed Hermione from his arms and

one of them raised his wand. They laid her out as though she was on an invisible stretcher and proceeded down the hallway.

"Harry!" Lakey was saying, his hand tight around Harry's arm. "Is she all right? What happened to her?"

Harry would have answered but the head Healer motioned for Harry to follow.

"I'll tell you in a bit," Harry said curtly, following the Healers.

As Harry and Lakey passed, the lobby became utterly still. The attendants behind the information desk looked stricken as they saw Hermione's colorless body float towards the elevators. Groups of wizards stared as Harry followed behind his best friend.

The Healers directed Hermione into a large narrow lift and they all squeezed around her. One of the Healers pressed the appropriate button. Harry's eyes were still locked on Hermione when one of the Healers spoke.

"Mr. Potter?" a short man with light red hair said. "I'm Fredrick Waltham, the head Healer on duty. Can you tell us what happened to Counselor Granger?"

"She was taken to a Muggle hospital. Someone threw a brick at her and she hit the pavement extremely hard."

"Threw a what?" Lakey cried.

"A brick," Harry replied as calmly as he could. "The doctor said they stitched her up and..."

Harry looked down at the chart still wedged under his armpit.

"Here," Harry said, passing Waltham the clipboard. "This should explain what they did."

The Healer took it and read over it quickly. The elevator came to a halt.

"Great, thank you," Healer Waltham said. He motioned for his assistants to direct Hermione's body out onto the landing. He, Harry, and Lakey followed after.

"We've set her up in the VIP section of St. Mungo's," Waltham said as the assistant Healers slowly turned Hermione's body to the left. "We'll analyze her situation and see what needs to be done. Please follow me."

Again, Harry was escorted down a long hallway lined with patients' rooms. Though the smell of rubbing alcohol was gone, as were the brightly dressed nurses and doctors, Harry could not revel in the optimistic air of St. Mungo's.

They stopped before a room at the very end of the hallway. Room VIP-7.

The attendants had already laid Hermione on the bed. Now, they were pulling out their wands and passing them up and down Hermione's body, focusing particularly on her head.

Healer Waltham went to join them and Lakey and Harry were left alone.

"They threw a brick at her?" Lakey whispered, seething.

"Yes."

"This is outrageous, intolerable! Poor Hermione!"

Harry couldn't stand to listen to more.

"Did you send for Ron?"

"Yes," Lakey said, distracted for a moment. "I had some trouble tracking him down, though. Looks like he was in Portsmouth this afternoon. Anyway, I spoke with one of the workers at Weasley Wizard Wheezes and they said they'd message him immediately. He should be here shortly."

"All right," Harry replied quietly. He was watching the Healers bustle around Hermione.

"Harry?" Lakey said. "Are you all right?"

Harry turned to look at Lakey. Stark red rings encircled Lakey's eyes. Hermione's mentor had clearly been exceptionally distraught while Harry and Durkheim were at the Royal Hospital.

"I'm all right," Harry lied. "Hermione's alive, isn't she?"

Lakey nodded, smiling somewhat ruefully. "How could someone throw a brick at her? A brick. It's so crude, so utterly nonsensical..."

Silence passed between them.

"Maybe not," Harry said darkly, his voice low. "The words 'Muggle cunt' were written on the brick, John. Perhaps whoever did it wanted a crude, non-magical way of harming her—a woman they don't truly consider magical. It's not outside the realm of possibility."

"Yes, but a brick wouldn't kill her—well, not usually."

"I don't think they meant to kill her. They meant to warn her."

Ten minutes later the Healers had completed their evaluation and the head Healer called Harry and Lakey to Hermione's bedside.

"Well," Healer Waltham said, a genuine smile on his face. "For all the crap Muggle doctors take from us, they actually did a wonderful job on Hermione. Whoever her doctor was, he did everything absolutely right from a non-magical standpoint."

Lakey sighed in relief, a smile cracking through his grave countenance.

"Now that we know her condition is stable, we'll take her into the operating room," Healer Waltham explained. "We'll remove the stitches and apply a healing balm. It should only take a few minutes to close the lacerations and minimize the bruising. Then, we'll re-grow her hair. Sound good?"

Lakey nodded, near exultant.

"What about brain functionality?" Harry asked

"She'll make a full recovery. We just checked her for neurological damage. Her mind is running like wildfire. Once these Muggle pills wear off, she'll likely be bursting with things to say," Waltham chuckled.

Lakey laughed as well. "Sounds like our Hermione!"

"I'll need someone to sign a consent form," Waltman said, flipping through some sheets on a bottle green clipboard. "Has her husband arrived?"

Harry felt a small tug in his stomach, like a reflex. He supposed it was just a residual reaction to pretending to be Hermione's husband in the Royal Hospital, but for some reason Harry wanted to reach for the proffered pen. To sign his name.

"No, he hasn't," Lakey said.

"Well, Director," Waltham said to Lakey, "you can sign for her."

Lakey took the clipboard and quickly wrote his name.

"I'll go set up an operating room for Counselor Granger. You two can sit with her until it's ready. Should be about ten minutes or so."

"Thank you, Healer Waltham," Lakey said.

The Healer departed with his attendants. The room became quiet again, Hermione's rapid breaths punctuating the silence.

Lakey, rocking slightly on the balls of his feet, looked between Hermione and a silent Harry. "How about I fix us some tea, Harry? It's been quite a morning," Lakey said kindly.

Harry nodded vaguely and Lakey moved out into the hallway, closing the door softly behind him.

Harry stood in place. Then he took a few hesitant steps towards Hermione's bed, circling around to her right side. He looked down at her for a moment before he picked up her hand. It was ice cold.

Harry gently rubbed it between his hands, trying to pass some of his warmth to her. There was a chair behind him, and he lowered

himself on to it. Slowly, he raised her hand to his chest and let it rest over his heart. He felt his rapid heartbeat push her small hand up and down. Harry gazed into her face, memorizing the details. Despite the bandages and patches of exposed scalp, she looked angelically calm—the same rose lips peeking out through the strands of her wavy hair.

As Harry stared at the thick lashes that shrouded her eyes, he raised her hand to his face. First, he pressed it against both of his cheeks. Then, slowly, brought it to his lips. He kissed the front and back of her palm and then moved to her fingers, letting his lips brush each finger in turn.

"Hermione, Hermione," Harry sighed against her fingers, his voice barely audible. "What were you doing, my darling?"

Harry stood up, agonized. Yet, he had no thoughts other than her cool hand in his own and her soft, serene face. It seemed like a perfect and natural thing to lean forward, to place a gentle kiss on each of her cheeks, to brush away the stray hairs. To kiss her sleeping eyelids.

"Hermione, my darling. My beautiful. What are you doing to me?"

He kissed her lips. Lightly, then tenderly, and only fleetingly.

Someone cleared their throat at the door. Harry looked up, expecting to see Lakey there with tea. It was Durkheim.

"Chief," he said quietly.

"George," Harry replied. He moved away from Hermione, though he did not release her hand.

Durkheim glanced at Harry's fingers entwined with Hermione's, but he said nothing.

"I took the evidence to the AD and had Lao begin the examination. I hope that's all right? Also, I got the names and address you requested."

Durkheim took out a small piece of Muggle paper from his coat. He passed it to Harry.

Harry unfolded it and read:

Anna Douthat and Greg Alans
14 Dewsbury Road, Brent, Greater London

"Thank you," Harry said to Durkheim.

"It's no problem, sir."

Ron arrived just as Hermione was being transferred to the operating room. He was in a near panic when he saw Hermione floating in mid air.

"Oh my God! Hermione!" he cried, his face flushed. "What's happened to her? What's wrong with her head?"

"Mr. Weasley," Healer Waltham said, grabbing Ron before he could reach Hermione. "Your wife is going to be fine. She has a slight head injury, which we are about to take care of in the operating room. Chief Potter can give you more details. If you like, you three can come watch the procedure in the viewing gallery," Waltham said, gesturing to Harry, Lakey, and Ron.

Ron nodded absently, not really understanding. Harry took him by the arm and had Lakey explain what had happened. As they followed the Healers down the hallway, Ron had the same reaction to Hermione's incident: disbelief and consequent disgust.

The three men stood in the viewing gallery as the three Healers hovered around Hermione in the operating room.

Harry only vaguely listened as Lakey continued to explain the incident to Ron. He kept his eyes trained on the operating room, watching as the Healers turned Hermione onto her side. Her small frame was nearly naked, the Muggle hospital gown her only covering. He watched as Healer Waltham methodically removed each Muggle stitch from Hermione's scalp. The useless sutures made a soft clink, clink as they landed in a metal tray.

Another Healer was gently spreading a light green paste over Hermione's lacerations and along the fissure line where Dr. Srinivasan has broken Hermione's skull. Minutes later, the paste

was swept away to reveal a completely healed, if slightly bruised, scalp. Finally, Healer Waltham waved his wand over Hermione's head and hair burst forth from Hermione's head. The same golden brown ringlets.

Harry remained stoic, a fist clenched at his side, through Ron's arrival, Hermione's operation, and the arrival of Ginny and Mrs. Weasley. When Hermione was moved back into her room, Ron and Mrs. Weasley went to her bedside.

Ginny stood off to the side with Harry. He felt her wrap her arms around his torso and hug him tightly.

"Such a horrible thing," Ginny said softly. "I'm so glad she's okay."

Harry was about to offer the fake smile he had been using all day. He was about to say "me too" or something similar.

But, Harry remained silent. He could not speak. Right then, Ron had picked up Hermione's hand and pressed his lips to her fingers.

Chapter 8: Hermione's Task

All in all, Harry could only tolerate eight minutes in Hermione's room at St. Mungo's. Eight minutes of Mrs. Weasley crooning over Ron. Eight minutes of Ginny telling forced jokes. Eight minutes of Healers and assistants walking slowly by their room to peer unabashedly through the blinds. But most of all, only eight minutes of watching Ron stroke Hermione's hand.

It was close to three o'clock. The Healers had informed Harry that Hermione would wake up in a few hours as the Muggle painkillers faded. They could have simply used an Enervation spell to wake her up, but the Healers thought it was best to give her a few more hours of untroubled sleep.

Lahey had left ten minutes ago to attend to some paperwork. As for Harry, he desperately wanted—no needed—to get away from Hermione's crowded room. He needed to think, to reassess, to decide what to do next. Harry thought briefly of returning to the AD. He certainly had paperwork to file regarding Hermione's incident and he would have to analyze the evidence they had recovered from the site of Hermione's attack.

Yet, somehow the prospect of leaving St. Mungo's—and Hermione—was unfathomable. Moreover, Harry simply wasn't ready to see Hermione's scarlet-soaked clothing and the gruesome slab of stone dipped in her blood. He didn't think he could stomach that right now.

Torn, Harry turned towards the door.

"I'm going to find some food," he lied. He had not eaten since six that morning, yet he was not even remotely hungry.

Only Ginny turned around to look at him.

"Do you want me to come with you?" she asked.

"No," Harry answered too quickly. "You should stay here with Ron..."

Ginny glanced at her brother. Ron's face was still white and he was absently listening to Mrs. Weasley while he played with the end of Hermione's blanket.

"All right," she said softly. She walked towards Harry and gently took his hand. Harry did not look at her. "I'll message you if there's any change. If you see George down by the lobby, tell him where we are. Ron said he would be coming shortly."

"Fine," Harry said, slipping his hand out of Ginny's. He was glad George was coming to see his sister-in-law, but the thought of one more person in Hermione's small room simply made Harry more ill at ease.

He turned on his heel and strode into the hallway. A small gathering of assistant Healers quickly pretended they were not waiting to catch a glimpse of Harry Potter and became occupied in reading their charts or with talking to one another.

Harry barely looked at them and turned down the nearest empty hallway. Hands in his pockets, he stared at the white, marble floor as it passed beneath his feet. His thoughts swirled around Hermione—her colorless, yet exceedingly tranquil, face.

After the Healers had sealed her wounds and re-grown her hair, it now appeared as though she were merely sleeping. But, Harry could not get the image of Hermione in the Muggle hospital out of his head. How very small and fragile she had appeared. He had felt as though his heart may fail just looking at her. He had not been so scared in a very long time. Years, perhaps decades.

Harry's feet had taken him down a deserted hallway. He looked up and down the corridor, gazing at the unfamiliar surroundings. At the very end of the hallway, however, there was a sign. It hung over two double doors: The Janus Thickey Ward. It was the long-term care ward, the ward Harry had visited in his fifth year after Arthur Weasley had been bitten by Voldemort's snake, Nagini.

Harry stared at the sign for a moment. The Visitors' Tearoom was one floor above him, if Harry remembered correctly. Yet, Harry did not turn around. He began to walk towards the gleaming doors.

Harry stopped before entering and peered through the small square windows set into the top of the door. He could see a few Healers moving around inside and perhaps eight to ten beds lined up against the wall. Before Harry could discover what was so interesting about the ward, he was nearly knocked to the ground as someone abruptly pushed through the door.

"Chief Potter?" Healer Waltham exclaimed in surprise as Harry regained his balance. "Is everything all right? Has there been a change with Mrs. Weasley?"

Harry had to think for a moment as to which one he meant. "Um, no. I was just...walking," Harry supplied, lamely.

"Oh," said the Healer. "Yes, well I was just checking on a few patients here in the extended stay ward. I'll come check on Mrs. Weasley in a bit. She shouldn't wake up for another hour, I expect..." He paused, as if suddenly remembering something. "In fact, I was just attending to the Camerons. Hermione visited them just this morning before her...incident."

"The Muggle family?"

"Yes," Waltham said sadly. "I'm afraid to say there hasn't been much of an improvement."

"How bad is it?" Harry asked, not really caring.

The Healer paused again. "Well, I could show you if you like? If you have the time..."

Harry thought fleetingly of the tearoom and food, but the prospect of eating simply aggravated the queasy feeling in his stomach.

"Er, all right. I really don't have too long...I have to return to the Ministry," Harry lied, following Waltham as he pushed through the doors again.

"Of course," Waltham replied.

Harry quickly looked around the small ward. There were about twenty beds in the room. Natural light was flooding through several high windows at each end of the ward. Harry saw two solitary

patients at the far end of the room. One was asleep and the other was reading the Daily Prophet upside down.

Harry smirked. That's the only way to read that piece of shit, he thought bitterly.

Waltham was leading Harry down the opposite end of the ward. There, two sets of white curtains cordoned off the last quarter of the room. Waltham separated the curtains and ushered Harry inside.

At first, Harry thought he had walked into someone's apartment. The walls were covered with pictures, some in frames, but mostly Muggle photographs taped to the walls. There was a small Persian rug in the center of the space and a Muggle television tucked into the corner. Four beds took up the rest of the room. Harry caught a glimpse of a young girl laid out on the closest bed. Something like a foamy, blue mosquito net was hovering above her.

Harry didn't have a chance to examine the curiosity as Waltham was directing him towards two other beds. An older gentleman looked up quizzically at the Healer.

"Fred? What's this?" the man asked. He set down what appeared to be a crime novel and sat up a little straighter against the pillows of his bed.

"Walter," the Healer said slowly and clearly, "you have a visitor. This is Mr. Harry Potter. He's a very important man with the Ministry I was telling you about. He's come to see how you and the family are doing."

Harry thought Waltham's explanation was a bit much considering this was a spur of the moment visit, but Harry held out his hand anyway.

Walter took it. He had a strong, warm grip.

The older man considered Harry for a moment, smiling. The man had light blue eyes that seemed oddly filmy, as though he were half-asleep.

The Healer directed Harry to the bed adjacent to Walter Cameron's.

"And this is his wife, Theresa."

Harry shook her hand as well. It was cool to the touch. Harry got a faint whiff of clean laundry and lilies. The woman had light brown hair with white streaks in certain places. It was obvious she died her hair as there was about a quarter inch of grey roots all along her scalp.

"It's a pleasure," Harry said awkwardly. The woman also had a milky gaze and Harry wished he could stop staring.

Harry often berated himself for being unable to interact perfectly with Muggles. After all, he had been raised as a Muggle and though the word "raised" didn't quite describe his upbringing with the Dursleys, he respected Muggles. He in no way thought of them as inferior to wizards. Yet, interacting with them (after decades of living as a wizard) made Harry somewhat uncomfortable, like he was meeting an estranged second cousin.

"What a handsome man," Theresa said, smiling absently. "We've had so few visitors, Walter."

Walter nodded in agreement. "Very few."

Healer Waltham smiled sadly. "Only Counselor Granger has visited with them," he explained. "Of course, we haven't been able to inform the family's relatives about the Camerons' condition as that would require divulging their situation...which is quite hard to explain to Muggles even if it wasn't against the law..."

Walter laughed at Waltham's words.

"I wish we understood our situation!" he said jollily.

Harry looked at the Muggle, confused. "What does he mean?"

Waltham sighed uncomfortably. "We're still testing the limits of the damage the Camerons sustained to their memories. None of them remember the attack clearly, but there are other, more troubling lapses.... For instance, Theresa doesn't always remember she has two children. Sometimes she only remembers her oldest child, Nicole. Walter occasionally seems to forget his occupation. He's a

banker...like the goblins at Gringotts," Waltham explained more for himself than for Harry.

"Just like a goblin!" Walter said proudly as he listened to Waltham and Harry's conversation.

"Is this permanent?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"That's hard to say," Waltham said slowly. "We're giving them daily tonics and fiddling with the correct amount of Memory Potion in each dose. It's been rather difficult, actually. Muggles don't seem to respond well to our treatment. It must be something about their genetics that we don't understand. We have several Healers consulting on the case, but at the moment we're at a loss as to how to restore their memories."

"Direct counter-charms don't work?" Harry questioned.

"Not in the slightest. If Theo Callahan attacked this family, he may have used a memory charm so severe as to be irreversible in Muggles. We've never had a case like it, so we're doing the best that we can."

"How long will they have to stay here, then?" Harry said, trying to avoid Walter's dreamy gaze.

Waltham sighed again. "I wish I could give you a better answer, Chief Potter. Some of the Healers are beginning to worry that this is an inalterable condition. If it is, they may not be able to function in Muggle society...If Mr. Cameron doesn't remember his occupation and Mrs. Cameron doesn't remember both of her children...it will be quite impossible for them to return to their normal lives."

"Well, surely she remembers everything that's happening now? Can't you just tell her she has another child and she'll learn to consider the child as her own?" Harry tried to reason.

"I wish it were that simple," Waltham answered, turning away slightly from Mrs. Cameron's bed. "On the days where she doesn't remember her son, Duncan, well... she acts very violently towards him. She won't even allow him to be in the same room as her. So we've been sending him to the children's ward every time that

happens...of course, the boy is very upset. He still remembers who his mother is..."

Harry's mouth felt dry. He tried to think of a response to Waltham's words, but nothing filled his mind but a distant memory. Some twenty-one years ago he had seen one of his close friends visit his parents in this very ward. They too did not remember who their son was...

Neville Longbottom's parents had died five years ago. In the end, they had been in an advanced state of dementia and could not feed or care themselves. Neville took his ailing parents back to their ancestral home and stayed with them until they passed away. Harry had attended the small funeral—not many people remembered the horrible crime that had befallen Frank and Alice Longbottom so many years ago. Harry could still envision Neville's tear-stained face...

"But they are functional..." Harry said quickly, trying to find something to redeem the situation and push Neville's face from his mind.

"Yes," Waltham replied. "We are hopeful that we'll eventually find some sort of solution. In terms of functionality, we need them to remember what's happening now, not necessarily what happened in the past."

"I guess that means they won't be able to provide testimony against Callahan..." Harry pondered, looking at his feet.

"Most likely so," Waltham said. "I told that to Counselor Granger, but she did not seem particularly concerned. Besides, it would be unprecedented to have a Muggle testify against a wizard. Most irregular," Waltham chuckled.

Harry disliked the Healer's dismissive tone, but he had to agree. He tried to remember any case in wizarding law in which a Muggle had testified against a wizard. Harry was rubbish at History of Magic, but he was sure he would have remembered a detail like that. A Muggle's testimony simply wouldn't count for much in a wizard court.

Harry looked back at Mr. and Mrs. Cameron. Mr. Cameron had obviously become bored with their conversation and had re-

immersed himself inside his book. However, Mrs. Cameron was looking across the room, a troubled and somehow aching lost expression on her face. Harry followed her eyes to the young girl lying on the bed a few feet away.

Waltham followed her eyes as well.

"Oh, yes," the Healer said. "I haven't introduced you to the children."

Waltham guided Harry to the two beds at the opposite end of the room. Looking past the young girl, Harry's eyes landed on the last occupant in the room.

A young boy of twelve was sitting up on the bed. He had light brown hair with a few flecks of gold. His face was pale and small, making his eyes appear larger and brighter than normal. Yet, they were lovely eyes—blue like his father's, but with flecks of sea green. He was watching Harry and Waltham approach with growing trepidation.

"Duncan?" Waltham said to the boy. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Harry Potter. He's come to check how you are doing."

"Hello, Duncan," Harry said, leaning forward.

The boy did not respond. He glanced briefly at Harry's face before he ducked down, hiding his eyes behind his shaggy hair.

"He can be very shy," Waltham explained to Harry. "Counselor Granger is the only one he seems to open up to. Even so, we've been able to get some information from him. He told Counselor Granger that on the night of the attack, he and his sister had been sleeping when they heard shouting downstairs. Duncan says he knew it wasn't an argument between his parents. It was a stranger's voice. Apparently, his sister wanted to call the Muggle police from their room, but Duncan ran downstairs. His sister followed after him. And that's all he remembers. It's the closest Magical Law Enforcement has to an eye-witness report of the incident."

Harry watched the boy sadly. As Waltham was speaking, the boy had quietly crept underneath his covers so as to hide his face completely.

Harry turned and took a few steps away from the bed, so as to give the child some privacy. "What else has he forgotten?"

"Actually, very little else," the Healer smiled. "He knows exactly where he is and what is happening around him. He also seems to remember everything from his past. For instance, he knows that he's missing school right now. He understands there is something wrong with his sister and that his mother has trouble remembering him. I am most hopeful about his recovery. Even if the others do not improve, Duncan can likely reenter the Muggle world—if they find a proper adoptive family."

"He must have godparents," Harry protested.

"Perhaps, but we're not in a position to find them, are we? We can't inform his godparents why Duncan would need to be adopted. Moreover, there's no Muggle liaison at the Ministry, for example, who could place Duncan in an adoptive program. I truly don't know what will happen to him."

Harry nodded. Just then, however, he heard a sound from underneath the covers of the boy's bed. It was the crisp sound of a page turning.

Harry spun around. Duncan was sitting up in his bed, though the sheets still covered him completely, creating a tent for himself. In that instant, curiosity seemed to grab a hold of Harry and he took a few hesitant steps towards the boy's bed.

"Duncan?" Harry called out calmly. "What have you got there?"

The boy grew still under the sheets. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Mrs. Cameron looking curiously in their direction.

"Come out now. It's okay," Harry said gently.

Slowly, the covers slid off the boy's head, pooling in his lap. The sheets landed on what appeared to be a rather large book resting on the boy's legs.

"What's that you have there?" Harry asked again, reaching forward.

"It's nothing!" the boy cried in a frightened voice. He moved towards the edge of the bed away from Harry.

"Don't worry," Harry placated him as he slowly seated himself on the far corner of the bed. "I just wanted to see what you were reading..."

With anxious eyes, the boy stared at Harry for a long moment. He seemed to come to the conclusion that Harry meant no harm. He pushed the covers away and as Harry expected, he saw an enormous book bound in handsome burgundy leather. Yet, as Harry looked more closely, he was surprised to see that it was actually a wizard medical book.

"What's this now?" Waltham exclaimed, catching sight of the book as well and coming towards the bed. "Where did you get that, Duncan?" he asked sternly.

"I-I-I found it, Dr. Waltham," the boy said, panicky. "I-I found it in the... lib-library."

"Duncan, I've told you the medical library is off limits."

The boy nodded sullenly, though he was stroking the book absently, almost lovingly. Harry looked down at the page—it was a moving diagram of a wizard brandishing his wand over a broken leg. The leg was snapping in half and healing itself in a perpetual loop.

The illustration was strangely beautiful...Harry could see why the boy might like it.

"Wait, can you see that it's moving?" Harry asked the boy, gesturing to the page.

Duncan seemed confused until he followed Harry's eyes to the diagram.

"Yes, sir."

"Huh," Harry nodded, considering this. "I didn't know a book's magic worked on Muggles..."

Something changed in the boy's face. He pulled away from Harry again. "Why wouldn't it work?" the boy snapped. "I can see just like any of you!"

"Calm down, boy," Waltham said, an edge in his voice. "Mr. Potter was simply asking you a question. Apologize to him right away."

The boy looked angrily at Harry before he looked down. He reluctantly shut the book in his hands. "You can have the book back. I won't apologize."

"You are being very childish, Duncan. Mr. Potter is a very important person. You mustn't shout at him."

"He's being childish! Calling me a stupid name!" the boy hissed under his breath. If Harry had not been sitting right next to him, he might not have heard it.

"Stupid name?" Harry said, confused.

"It's that name," the boy returned, anguish coloring his voice. "It's the name all of you use around here: 'Muggle.' Everyone says it. It means we're stupid right? Me and my family. That we aren't like you."

Waltham coughed uncomfortably while Harry stared at the boy. Duncan refused to look at the two older men, his eyes fixed on the far corner of his bed.

Those greenish eyes set into a determined face reminded Harry of another boy... A boy he missed very much...

Harry slowly reached up and patted the boy on the shoulder. "Do you like these books, Duncan?"

The boy shrugged off Harry's hand. "Yes," he answered curtly. "I like the pictures and how they move."

"What do you think about what is written in them?"

The boy seemed to relax slightly. "I like it a lot," Duncan supplied. "I think it's amazing! They say a lot of funny things, and incantations, and spells. I didn't think all this was real before."

Harry smiled slightly. Twenty-six years ago, he might have had the same reaction when he opened his first spell book...

However, the difference was that Harry actually had the ability to perform the spells found in those wonderful books. Duncan could never take more than an intellectual interest in magic...if he was even allowed to remember encountering it.

"Be that as it may," Waltham was saying. "You'll have to return the book, Duncan. They are needed for the real Healers. And you aren't to go wandering outside of the children's ward anymore."

"But no one talks to me there..." the boy whispered.

Harry glared at the Healer for a moment. Life inside the walls of a wizarding hospital did not seem particularly easy for a Muggle child. Going to the library was probably his only refuge. Thinking this, Harry was reminded of a woman he knew very well...a woman who viewed the library as a refuge...

"Do you like Counselor Granger, Duncan?"

The boy's head lifted immediately. He was wearing the first genuine smile Harry had seen on his face. Even then, however, it was a guarded smile.

"Oh, yes," he replied empathically. He began gently kicking his legs under the sheets. "She's wonderful. She brought us our TV and all these pictures. She's the only one who comes to visit and she's just so..." He stopped.

"What?"

"...beautiful..." the boy whispered, his cheeks coloring.

Harry laughed. "She is, isn't she? Well, Duncan, she's a very good friend of mine. I've known her since I was eleven."

The boy stared at Harry with newfound respect. "Do you know when she'll be back?"

Harry hesitated. It was probably best not to tell Duncan about what had transpired that morning. How could the boy understand that Hermione had been the target of an attack? An attack based off of the fact that a subset of the wizarding population believed she was too much like a Muggle, too much like Duncan....

"I don't know," Harry answered. "I'll ask her, okay? And maybe next time we'll both come and visit you. We'll bring you some magic books so you don't have to take them from the library."

The boy smiled again. "That would be great. Thank you..."

There was a light cough from behind them. "Finally some politeness out of you," Healer Waltham said to the boy. "Chief Potter, if you'll come with me, I'll tell you about the girl's condition."

Harry stood up and patted the boy's head before he followed the Healer to the bed closest to the curtains.

"Nicole Cameron. Fifteen years old," Waltham said. "We've had her in a magical coma since we collected her from her home. We ran a diagnostic spell on her brain and found that portions of her frontal lobe had been severely damaged. This includes the inferior frontal gyrus, which controls speech. We have a Muggle doctor consulting on the case. He calls the area Brogga's area or Broca's area? I can't remember. In any case, the damage may have severe repercussions on her speech, motor skills, and her ability to recognize those around her."

"Have you tried waking her up?" Harry asked, looking down at the girl. The blue haze that surrounded her bed obscured her face slightly. Yet, Harry could see her light brown hair spread across the pillow and her serene face.

"We did, once. It's hard to say whether she fully regained consciousness. When her eyes finally opened, she was unable to speak, though it looked as though she was trying. She did seem to recognize her brother when he came to her side. So, that's reason enough to remain hopeful."

"So what are you trying to do to help her?"

"Well, we are hoping to replicate some of her brain matter that was lost in the attack. That's what this blue spell work is for. It keeps our spells in a highly concentrated area where they can penetrate her brain repeatedly. Of course, we're having the same problem that we had with all the others—Muggles don't seem to respond well to magic."

"Can it be...that perhaps they should be shifted to a Muggle hospital? Surely this sort of thing...brain damage...happens to Muggles. Don't they have some resources to deal with it...?"

The Healer laughed derisively. "Chief Potter, I think these Muggles are rather lucky to be here than in some Muggle hospital. They cut into people's heads down there and sew them up like dolls...it's practically medieval."

"Yes," Harry whispered, annoyed, "but you said the Muggle doctor saved Hermione's life with just those techniques..."

"Perhaps, but had there been a Healer on the scene, Counselor Granger would have been cured in an instant. Instead, she had to go through some ghastly procedure. It's a miracle she survived and you were able to transport her here..."

Harry ground his teeth together as the image of Hermione in the Muggle hospital overwhelmed him. A light prickling sensation ran down Harry's back and he shivered. He didn't want to contemplate the thought that the Healer had just voiced...that he may not have reached Hermione in time...

Waltham was still speaking.

"Besides, these Muggles have sustained a magical injury, which suggests that they will need a magical cure. I'm very hopeful that we'll begin to see some progress with their condition as we refine their potion dosage."

Harry nodded.

"Well, that's really the whole of it, Chief Potter. I can take you down to Counselor Granger's room if you like. It's been nearly an hour. She may be beginning to come to."

Harry needed no further instigation than that. Before he passed through the curtains, however, Harry turned and glanced at the Muggle family. Walter Cameron was absorbed in his book, scratching his head absently. Nicole was immobile as always, her chest rising and falling peaceably. Mrs. Cameron was gazing at Harry, her eyes eerily foggy. She gave him a hesitant smile. Last, Harry's eyes landed on Duncan, who was watching Harry closely. Harry gave the boy a wide grin and cheerful wave goodbye. The boy smiled as well, his greenish-blue eyes crinkling in the corners. The magical book was still clutched in his arms.

When Harry returned to Hermione's room with Healer Waltham, he was dismayed to find it more crowded than ever. George had arrived with his wife, Angelina, and several more Healers were standing in the corner of the room gossiping to one another.

"Harry," Ron called from Hermione's bedside. "Come over. She's been moving around a bit and muttering. We think she's going to wake up soon."

Harry quickly moved towards the bed. Ron was still seated on Hermione's right side, Mrs. Weasley just behind him. Ginny was on Hermione's left and Harry quickly wormed his way next to Ginny—or more like subtly pushed her further along the bed so that he could have prime access to Hermione as she stirred.

And indeed, she was stirring. Her eyebrows had drawn together and her fingers were slowly flexing and un-flexing themselves.

"Healer Waltham," Mrs. Weasley said to the Healer standing just behind Harry, "Do you think we could just wake her up? It's been long enough, don't you think?"

Waltham pressed to the front to peer at Hermione more closely. The other Healers had also moved to the bed, creating a ring of people around Hermione. Harry wanted to curse them to pieces, so annoying did he find their presence, but he restrained himself. Instead, he watched as Waltham let his wand hover over Hermione's troubled face. A faint pink light emitted from the wand and Waltham smiled.

"Yes, yes," he sighed. "It will do no good to fret over her like this. I'll go ahead and wake her."

Waltham flicked his wand at Hermione. "Enervate!"

Hermione's whole body jolted as she came to. Hermione's eyes shot open and flitted across the swarm of faces above her.

"Wha—" she mumbled. Her eyes landed on Ron first. "R-ron?"

Ron picked up her hand again. "Yes, darling, it's me. You're in St. Mungo's."

"What? What's going on?" Hermione mumbled again, pulling her eyes away from her husband. Hermione seemed to be both mortified and petrified as her increasingly lucid eyes scanned the faces that swam before her. Her eyes stopped when she saw Harry. Then they widened.

"Harry!" she cried, trying to sit up only to have Healer Waltham push her back down. "We had an appointment! I'm so sorry! I—"

In another context, Harry might have laughed to see Hermione so upset about missing an appointment while she was lying in a hospital bed. Now, he only picked up her other hand and rubbed his thumb across her palm.

"Shh, it's all right. You had an accident and everything is all right now," Harry said as calmly as he could. In actuality, he was just so damn happy to see her eyes again. To hear her voice. To know she was fine, alive...back to him.

"Accident," she repeated, her eyes still on Harry. "I—what? I was just heading to your office..."

Healer Waltham cleared his throat. Hermione turned her head at the noise.

"Counselor Granger, I'm Healer Waltham, the Head Healer assigned to your case," he said kindly to her. "It appears you sustained a pretty nasty head trauma this morning. You were taken to a Muggle hospital until Chief Potter located your whereabouts and brought you to St. Mungo's..."

"A Muggle hospital..." Hermione repeated, shocked.

"Yes. The Muggles there seemed to have performed amiably and they stitched up your head. Fortunately, as I said, Chief Potter came and transported you here so that we could heal you properly."

"Harry transported..." Hermione said, turning back to Harry. "Harry. What's going on?"

Harry hesitated. He looked quickly around the room. Everyone, from the random Healers at the foot of the bed to Ron clutching Hermione's hand, was staring at Harry.

He cleared his throat. "I'll explain everything," Harry whispered to her. "I'm going to need your account of what you remember from this morning. Unfortunately," Harry said, turning to address the others in the room, "I'll need to get her account in private. This is now an official matter for the Auror Department," he said with finality.

The Healers looked uncomfortably at each other, as though they had been denied a delicious treat. However, they hurriedly left the room. George and Angelina nodded and followed after them. Healer Waltham patted Harry on the back before he too moved towards the exit.

"Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, "surely you can have family in the room? I don't want to leave Hermione at a time like this."

Harry shook his head. "It will only take a few minutes, Molly. Let me discuss it with her alone, and then I'll call you back in."

Mrs. Weasley looked as though she might protest, but her shoulders slumped and she began to move towards the door. "Ginny, come along," she called.

"Harry?" Ginny said, looking up at him. She obviously wanted to stay as well.

"Just a few minutes, Gin. I promise," Harry said glancing momentarily at her.

She followed her mother out of the room. Finally, it was only Harry, Ron, and a very confused Hermione.

"Do you really need me to go too, mate?" Ron asked. He had not moved from his chair and was still holding Hermione's hand tightly in his own.

Watching Ron's pleading expression, Harry felt his resolve waiver. Harry truly wanted to be with Hermione alone—to confirm for himself that she was fine, to rejoice in the fact that she was alive and well. Yet, he reluctantly realized that Ron, as her husband, needed that same confirmation as well. It would be selfish of Harry to deny Ron access to his wife.

"Uh, sure. Fine," Harry said.

Refusing to let go of Hermione's other hand, Harry removed his wand from his cloak, conjured a chair, and sat down. Hermione watched him worriedly.

"Hermione, what's the last thing you remember about today?" Harry asked gently.

"Um," Hermione mumbled. "The last thing?"

"How about you start when you left the house? It was just after I told you to meet me for lunch in the AD," Harry supplied, hoping to kick start her memory.

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, recollection dawning on her still overly pale face. "Well, after that...I went upstairs and got dressed. I apparated to the Ministry and I spoke with John and did some work for about two hours. Then, I decided I would come...here, actually. To St. Mungo's. I wanted to visit the Camerons in the extended stay ward."

"The Camerons?" Ron spoke up. "Who are they?"

"They're the Muggle family Callahan attacked," Harry answered quickly, his eyes still locked on Hermione. She smiled at him.

"Yes, I visited with them for maybe...I don't know, forty-five minutes to an hour? It was then I realized I was going to be a bit late for our appointment. I should have just apparated back to the Ministry, but I didn't..."

"What? Why?" Harry demanded.

Suddenly, Hermione looked exceptionally guilty. She ducked her head down and her hand twisted uncomfortably inside Harry's. He held onto it more tightly.

"Hermione," Harry said in his most authoritative tone, "tell me what you did."

"I didn't do anything!" Hermione said, indignant.

Harry raised his eyebrows and Hermione glared at him for a moment before she sighed. "Okay, look. When I left the Camerons, it was probably just about noon. I figured you wouldn't mind if I was a little late, so I decided to walk back to the Ministry."

"Walk?" Ron repeated, as though the word was foreign to him. "Why?"

"Well...because I knew it might be my last chance to do so," Hermione explained, looking down at her sheets. "At least it was my last chance without a security unit in tow. The Ministry and St. Mungo's are only about eight blocks apart. Is it really so bad to want to enjoy your last moments of complete solitude by taking a walk? The weather was beautiful. I figured you wouldn't mind waiting, Harry. So I just took off towards the Ministry..."

Harry nodded slowly. This answer seemed to make perfect sense. It had been a beautiful fall day, and considering the fact that Hermione was only going to find a paranoid best friend with a team of bodyguards waiting for her at the Ministry...well, he could see why Hermione might want to postpone the inevitable.

Still, he would have to be harsh.

"Hermione," Harry said gravely. "What were you thinking? You had just received a number of death threats. What possessed you that you thought walking around without protection was a good idea?"

"Harry," Hermione said, exasperated. She removed her hand from his. "It was a Sunday in Muggle London. It was daytime. It's not like it's a particularly dangerous part of town either."

"But Hermione, you had death threats. Do you understand that?" Harry demanded, angry with her for the first time. He missed the secure sensation of having her hand in his.

"Of course! But, it's not like anyone was going to attack me there!"

"Well, that's exactly what fucking happened, Hermione. You were attacked."

"What?" she said, disbelieving. She eyed Harry like he was crazy. "N-no I wasn't!"

"You were. Someone threw a brick at your head. You were knocked unconscious and bled out onto the sidewalk until some Muggles found you. They called an ambulance and you were taken to a hospital. Apparently, your brain was swelling and one of the doctor's had to crack open your skull to save your life. So yes, you were fucking attacked and I was the one who had to find you all beaten up and bleeding and take you back to St. Mungo's!"

Hermione stared at him, stunned. Harry suddenly regretted speaking so harshly to her. He hadn't meant to divulge the gory details of her attack...But she should know, shouldn't she? He never wanted to go through that experience again. It would kill him, of that he was sure. If he scared her straight...it was worth it, right?

Slowly, Hermione reached up a hand to feel the back of her head. She winced slightly.

"A brick?" she said, breathlessly. "How do you know it was thrown at me? It could have fallen, right—?"

Harry sighed. He had been hoping to delay this precise detail of the incident as well. "Something was written on it," Harry said, picking up her hand again. She did not pull away.

"What? On the brick?"

"Yes."

"What did it say?"

Harry looked down. "'Muggle cunt.'"

A ghastly silence met his words. It was Ron who reacted first.

"What?" Ron hissed, getting to his feet. "Those bastards.... What the fuck kind of game are they playing? This is fucking ridiculous!"

"Shh, Ron," Hermione chided, pulling him back down by the hand that was still locked around her own. "Calm down."

She turned back to Harry quite unperturbed. "Is that all? No other details?"

"The words were burnt into the brick by a spell. I have Aurors running tests on the rest of the evidence we recovered from the hospital. I don't know how much we'll find out."

Hermione nodded silently. Ron was fuming, staring at his shoes.

"Hermione," Harry said, his voice low. "I need to know the exact last thing you remember seeing on your walk."

Hermione studied his face for a moment. Now that she knew she had been attacked, she seemed to take the matter much more seriously. "Well, I was walking rather fast since I was already late for our appointment. I was looking into the shop windows as I past them...most of the stores were closed. I think I was about four blocks away from the Ministry when...I don't know. I think I was by a camera shop? I remember seeing expensive Muggle cameras in the window and rolls of film.... That's the last thing I remember."

Harry nodded. "You didn't see anyone approach you?"

"No. No, not at all. The street was completely deserted. I only saw maybe five people on the walk. A homeless man and a few other Muggles. But, the street was empty when I was by that camera shop..."

"So, you have no memory of being hit?"

"No. None whatsoever."

"All right," Harry said, thinking quickly. "It's possible your attacker apparated to the scene, threw the brick, and disappeared."

"The street was very quiet," Hermione said quickly. "I would have heard someone apparate."

"Maybe an Invisibility charm, then? Or a Disillusionment charm?"

"That means whoever it was may have been...stalking me for several blocks?"

"Maybe. Perhaps just as you left St. Mungo's?"

"Perhaps..."

Harry looked down at their entwined fingers. Despite the subject matter, he smiled slightly as they came to this conclusion. It was almost like the old days when Harry and Hermione finished each other's sentences as they figured out some new clue or spell. He wished it did not have to be such a gruesome puzzle they were figuring out this time.

"Why are you smiling?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Oh, uh," Harry sighed. "I was just thinking that you are so getting a security detail once I get you back in the AD."

"Hahaha," Hermione said lightly, though she was smiling. "What do you want me to say? That you were right?"

"That would be nice," Harry laughed.

"Fine. You were right. I needed a security detail. But I do not think it was wrong of me to want a few moments of peace before a group of Aurors starts shadowing my footsteps."

Harry's smile faded. "Hermione, it is wrong for you to want that when there are known death threats against you."

"You're one to talk," Hermione said, her grin fading as well. "Like death threats ever stopped you from sneaking into Hogsmeade or infiltrating the Ministry or...."

"This is different," Harry interrupted.

"How is it different?"

"Well," Harry sputtered. "Well, I was thirteen and an idiot..."

"Oh!" Hermione said sarcastically. "So after all these years, you finally admit it? I've been waiting a long time to hear that!"

"Well, apparently you haven't learned anything at all then," Harry shot back, his voice low. "You're thirty-seven and still acting like an idiot."

"You are such—" Hermione began.

"Hey, hey!" Ron shouted. "Do we really have to get into this now?"

Harry and Hermione quieted, still glaring at each other.

"God!" Ron said, exasperated. "Don't force me to be the mature one here!"

Hermione smiled at his words. Her hand was still entwined with Harry's, even through their fight. She slipped her hand out now and gently patted his hand.

"I'm sorry, okay?" Hermione said reluctantly. "It was risky. I should have realized that. Even if, you know...it was entirely safe and I shouldn't have to be on the look out for crazies..."

"Wow, great apology Hermione," Harry said, with a sardonic half-smile. "And yes, you shouldn't have to look out for crazies. That's what a security detail is for."

Hermione let out a frustrated growl, but she did not reply.

"So," Ron said, getting up and stretching. "What do we do now?"

"Well, I have to some work to finish..." Hermione said, straightening up against her pillows.

"No," Harry said sternly. "You're going home to rest while I finalize your security arrangements."

"What?" Hermione sputtered. "Are you a Healer? Who said I needed rest..."

Harry did not wait for Hermione to finish. "Healer Waltham!" Harry shouted.

The door immediately snapped opened and the Healer strode inside with Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, George, and Angelina in tow.

"Yes, Chief Potter," Waltham said coming up next to Harry.

"Does she need rest?" Harry demanded, waving a hand towards Hermione.

Waltham hesitated, looking between Harry's slightly threatening stance and Hermione's pleading expression. "Um, well yes. I would suggest you take at least a day off, Counselor Granger, so that you can let your bruising go down..."

"Thank you," Harry said satisfied, patting the Healer briefly on the back.

"But what if I didn't, Healer Waltham?" Hermione questioned. "I would be fine, wouldn't I?"

Waltham chuckled. "Well, someone is eager to return to work, aren't they? I would suggest one day off nonetheless, Counselor."

Harry passed her a wide grin.

"But...Harry," Hermione said more softly, a look of genuine concern crossing her face, "I'm cannot miss work tomorrow. If I do, everyone is going to think it was due to the Prophet articles. I can't have that. They'll think I'm ashamed to show my face when I actually couldn't care less about what was written about me."

"They won't think that," Harry said soothingly. "Once they find out about the attack, everyone will understand."

Hermione's face abruptly grew furious. "They are not going to find out about the attack, Harry!" she said ferociously. "I won't allow it!"

"Hermione, I have to file the paperwork. People are going to find out."

"Well, don't file it in my name," Hermione pleaded through clenched teeth. "Say it was some unidentified witch who was attacked. Write down whatever lie you have to so that no one will know something happened to me today."

The room went silent. Harry stared at her grimly, knowing this was one matter in which she could not be swayed.

"I'll make you a deal," Harry said slowly. "I will make sure your name is disassociated from the attack. In exchange, you have to take one day off of work."

"But—" Hermione sputtered. "I...that still doesn't stop people from thinking I'm laying low because of the Prophet."

"It's that or people finding out you were attacked," Harry said plainly, "which I personally think everyone should know."

"You would want that," Hermione spat. "You'd like everyone to know Hermione Granger was knocked out by a brick."

"No, no," Harry said, momentarily hurt. "I'd like everyone to know you're getting a security detail so they won't try and fuck with you."

Hermione considered him for a moment before she sighed. She pressed a palm against her forehead. "Fine. A half-day off."

"Hermione."

"A half-day," she said again, with finality. "I'll go in after lunch."

Harry was about to protest when Ginny stepped in.

"Well, that's settled then," the redhead said quickly. "Ron, you should take Hermione home so she can rest." She took a hold of Harry's arm.

Ron nodded and moved to help Hermione out of the bed. She brushed him away, however, and swung her legs over the side of

the bed. At that moment, Hermione realized she was completely naked except for her Muggle hospital gown.

"Wait," she said, her toes dangling over the floor. "Where are my clothes?"

"They were taken to the AD," Harry replied.

"Oh...well, I guess I can just apparate home. I don't really need my clothes to do that..." She looked around again. "Where's my purse? My wand?"

"Your purse is also at the AD," Harry answered her, recalling a small leather reticule splattered with blood.

"And my wand?" Hermione said, a flicker of panic crossing her eyes.

"It wasn't in the purse?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione said with certainty. "I keep it in my cloak."

"Maybe it's with your clothes then," Harry assured her.

Hermione still looked concerned. "Could you check somehow?"

"Um, sure. I'll ask my assistant on the case if your wand came in with the rest of the evidence," Harry said.

Harry pulled out his own wand. A giant silver stag erupted from its tip and charged out of the room almost too fast to see.

George and Angelina moved forward.

"Well, I guess we'll let you get settled then, Hermione," George said, coming towards his sister-in-law. He kissed her on the forehead and then stepped aside so that Angelina could embrace her.

"Thanks, guys," Hermione said embarrassed. "You really didn't have to come."

"What?" Angelina scolded her softly. "You were in trouble, Hermione. We had to come. You're family."

Hermione smiled somewhat ruefully and waved them goodbye as the couple moved towards the door.

"I should probably head back as well, Hermione darling," Mrs. Weasley was saying. "I left Xenophilius in charge of Hugo, and heaven knows what they've gotten up to!"

The older witch moved to stand in front of Hermione. She pressed Hermione to her bosom in a near-smothering hug. "You feel better, darling. And listen to Healer Waltham and rest, okay?"

"Yes, Molly," Hermione said, gently extracting herself from the older woman's grasp.

Then their mutually shared mother-in-law turned to Harry. "Harry dear, thank you so much for finding Hermione. I know it couldn't have been easy. I'm so proud of you!"

Without another word she enveloped Harry in another bone-crushing hug. Harry tried to draw breath. "It's no problem, Mrs. Weasley. I'm just glad Hermione's safe."

Mrs. Weasley smiled at this and quickly planted a kiss on Harry's cheek. Over her shoulder, Harry could see Hermione staring at him strangely.

With that, Mrs. Weasley swiftly kissed Ron and Ginny goodbye and stepped out of the room to disapparate.

"Is there anything else you need from me, Chief Potter?" Healer Waltham asked, rocking on his heels by the doorway.

"No, not unless you can convince Hermione to stay in bed a whole day," Harry said grinning.

The Healer turned to glance at Hermione and laughed at the expression on her face when she heard Harry's request.

"There's only so much one Healer can do, Chief Potter. Unlike you, I don't have the strength to stand up to that withering look," he said, gesturing towards Hermione. He turned to face her. "You feel better Counselor Granger. Please don't hesitate to contact me if your

condition worsens, and please do try to get as much rest as possible?"

"Thank you Healer Waltham. I'll try," she smiled sweetly.

Finally, only Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny remained. An awkward silence passed between them. Hermione obviously wanted to get off the bed, but the short, paper shift she was wearing did not exactly allow for that. Ginny moved forward and took a hold of Harry's hand again, pulling him away from the bed.

"Shouldn't we get going, darling—" she began. However, at that moment a small, silver beaver shot into the room. Its flat tail made a whooshing sound in the air as it skidded to a halt in front of Harry. It was Durkheim's patronus.

"Chief Potter," Durkheim's voice said from within the silvery form of the animal. "I personally searched through the evidence. No wand was found."

Upon delivering its message, the patronus faded into nothingness.

Hermione stared at the spot where the animal had vanished.

"Harry, my wand," she said again, looking increasingly alarmed. She was so alarmed that she actually slid off the bed. She quickly repositioned herself, however, so that her back was facing the wall. "Harry, what's happened to it?"

"I don't know?" Harry said, distracted now that Hermione's slender legs were on full display before him. "Um, maybe it was left at the hospital?"

"Left at the hospital?" she groaned in disbelief. She tugged at the hem of the gown, pulling it midway down her thigh. "How could you let that happen, Harry? Someone will have to go back and get it."

"Relax," Harry said smiling. A sudden thought had just occurred to him. "I'll go back to the hospital and get your wand. I know what your doctors and nurses looked like. I remember where your room was. So, I'll just walk to your room, summon your wand, and bring it back to you."

"Oh, thank you, Harry!" she said enthusiastically, letting go of her hem so that the paper material rose several inches up her thigh.

"You're welcome," Harry said grinning, directing his eyes upward to her face. "And I'll even do it on only one condition."

"Condition?" she said, suspicion returning to her voice.

"You'll take the full day off tomorrow."

"Harry, I already said—" she stopped. Her eyes narrowed. "Screw that. I'll go to the hospital myself and get it."

"Do you even know where you should summon it?" Harry asked nonchalantly.

Hermione made a scoffing sound. "All I have to do is get inside the hospital and summon it," she said confidently.

"Do you even know what hospital you were in?"

Hermione glared at him before she said, "I can just ask one of the Healers..."

"You really think they'll tell you if I tell them not to?"

Hermione was about to speak, but she stopped again. She turned to look out the narrow window into the hallway. Several Healers were still loitering outside, waiting to catch a glimpse of Harry. Hermione slowly came to the realization that none of them, not even the Head Healer, would tell her the name of the Muggle hospital if Harry was opposed to her receiving such information.

She spun slightly on her heel (a portion of her back became visible). "Ron, do you know where I was? Ginny?"

They both shook their heads. Ron was smiling, obviously approving of Harry's plan. Ginny, however, had a skeptical look on her face.

"I can find out," Hermione said forcefully, turning back to Harry.

"Even if you did," Harry said, watching her expression, "do you really want to Obliviate half the hospital when they see a piece of wood flying through the air of its own accord?"

Hermione's eyes shot daggers at him. Usually, Harry might have become instinctively afraid at such a look, but Harry was too busy reveling in the fact that he had actually outwitted Hermione at something.

"All right, fine Harry Potter. You've been very clever today," Hermione snapped. "Why don't you go get my wand and I might be amenable to staying in tomorrow?"

"I don't think that was my condition, Hermione," Harry said, raising his eyebrows.

She growled again, turning her head away.

Harry, expecting her to finally assent to his plan, was surprised when she next spoke.

"Okay, Harry," she said sweetly. "I agree to take the whole day off tomorrow if you go and get my wand. But, you have to invite the doctor who saved my life to dinner. With all four of us."

"What?" Ron and Ginny said in unison.

"Um, why is that necessary?" Harry said.

"Because, you said the Muggle doctors saved my life. Surely, you can invite one of them to dinner so I can thank him or her."

"But, Hermione—they were all Obliviated. They don't know who you are."

"Well, you'll just have to be creative, won't you?" Hermione said with a mischievous smile.

Harry was momentarily speechless. Even after recovering from a rather harrowing trauma, Hermione looked gorgeous. He was particularly struck by that smile. This, added to the fact that she was barely covered...well, Harry lost track of the conversation.

"Um, so wait—if I go and get your wand and invite a Muggle to dinner...you'll take a day off of work?" It sounded ridiculous when he said it.

"Yes."

Harry laughed. "Fine. What date should I tell him, madam?"

Hermione thought about this for a moment. "Tell him, my birthday—September 19th."

It was less than two weeks away.

"Fine," Harry said again.

"Hold on. Hold on," Ron interjected. "Why are we getting mixed up in all of this?" he demanded, gesturing to himself and Ginny. "Hermione, just say you'll take the full day off and Harry will get your wand. There's no need to have dinner with a bunch of Muggles," he finished, alarmed.

"I agree," Ginny said quietly from behind Harry.

"This isn't about my wand, Ron," Hermione said seriously. "I want to find the doctor who saved my life. I would invite him to dinner regardless. Harry is just saving me the trouble. So, what do you say Harry?"

Harry smirked. "All this to get you to take one day off of work? Sometimes you're truly unbelievable, Hermione."

Hermione smiled. "So you accept."

"I accept."

"Great! Well, that settles it," Ron said exasperated. "Hermione's taking a day off of work and we're having Muggles over for dinner. Wonderful."

"Yes, yes," Hermione said, turning towards Ron. "I'm taking a day off."

"Good," Harry said, thinking. "That'll give me a chance to get your security in place. I'll visit the hospital early tomorrow and then I'll come by your place with your security detail, sound good?"

"Fine," Hermione said, no longer protesting.

Harry smiled widely, watching as Hermione edged towards Ron while keeping her back to the wall.

"Let's go, darling," Ginny was saying, tugging on his arm more insistently.

Harry chanced one more glance at Ron and Hermione. He caught her eye just as he was disappearing.

Harry and Ginny landed in the foyer of their home. They were silent for a moment.

"Where's Lily?" Harry asked.

"I sent her to mum's when I left for St. Mungo's," Ginny replied, stonily.

"Did you tell her what happened?"

"No," Ginny said, moving towards the kitchen. "I didn't even know what was going on when I left."

"Right."

Harry realized there was a dull ache in his stomach. He had not eaten for nearly fourteen hours. He followed after Ginny into the kitchen. She moved towards the sink and began thoroughly washing her hands while Harry went into the pantry. He summoned some bread, mayonnaise, and ham from the icebox.

As Harry directed the ingredients to assemble themselves into a sandwich, Ginny sighed.

"It's been an eventful day, to say the least," she said from the sink.

Harry grunted.

The taps stopped and Ginny turned to face him.

"Are you all right?" she asked seriously.

Harry looked up from his completed sandwich. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Ginny continued to look at him.

"What do you want?" Harry said. "Hermione is safe. She'll be getting a security detail. Everything should be fine."

Ginny nodded slowly, almost skeptically. "You seemed very...detached from everything until she woke up..."

"Detached?" Harry said before taking a bite.

"Yes," Ginny said, picking up the hand towel tucked into the handle of the oven. She came forward to lean against the wooden counter facing Harry.

"You were strangely quiet until she woke up..."

"Well, I was thinking," Harry replied. That seemed obvious to him.

"About what?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know. I was thinking about the situation, what else? I was thinking about who had attacked her, what I would have to do..."

Ginny nodded again. Harry became more confused about where this conversation was heading.

"Why do you ask?" Harry questioned, as Ginny turned and walked towards the kitchen table. She picked up the Harry's copy of the Daily Prophet, which had been left there since early that morning.

"I don't know," she said nonchalantly, though there was an edge in her voice. "I just felt like...well, like you had tunnel vision to everything but Hermione today."

Harry considered this for a moment. He took another bite of his sandwich. "Why wouldn't I?" Harry said thickly. "She'd just been attacked."

Ginny didn't respond. She opened the Daily Prophet to the sports section and began rifling through it, looking for her own article.

As Ginny remained silent, Harry stared at the paper in her hands. The front-page story about the Callahan case glared back at him. He was not entirely sure what he meant to tell Ginny, but he could not remain silent either.

"Ginny, I was wondering...well, I've been meaning to ask you about the Prophet's reporting of the Callahan case."

Ginny lowered the paper, and indifferent look on her face. "What about it?"

"You can't ignore the fact that Hermione's attack may have had something to do with what was written in the Prophet today. All of her death threats referred to it. On top of that, what Howard Banbury wrote was complete rubbish. It borders on libel, to be honest..."

"Libel?" Ginny said, one eyebrow rising.

"Yeah," Harry said, his face becoming warmer as he recalled what the Prophet columnist had written about Hermione. "He used her Muggle-born activism as evidence that she wants the unification of the wizarding and Muggle worlds. You can't just make a jump like that. When has Hermione ever said anything even remotely indicative that she wants to unite both worlds?"

"Do you know for a fact that she doesn't?" Ginny asked coolly.

Harry stared at her for a moment, surprised she had even asked the question. "Of course. Hermione may be an idealist, but she knows her limits just like anyone else..."

"A lot of people don't think she knows her limits, Harry," Ginny said, returning her gaze to the paper.

"But you know that she does. It's a lie to say otherwise."

"If it's a lie, Hermione should correct it herself," Ginny said stonily.

Harry gaped at her. "Well, I'm sure correcting it would be a lot easier if the Prophet wasn't printing this bullshit about her. It's not even journalism now. It's just mean-spirited and dangerous for the Prophet to be spewing these lies about her."

Ginny sighed, looking up again. "What do you want me to do about it, Harry?"

He paused. "Well, maybe you could talk to Banbury..."

"I'm in the sports section, Harry. It's not my place to dictate how Howard should do his job."

"But you're an editor..."

"A co-editor. And it's still not my place. Howard is an opinion writer. The only person who can influence what he writes is the editorial section editor."

"I know how the hierarchy of the Prophet works, Ginny," Harry said, frustrated. "I'm not asking you to go through official channels. You could just communicate to Banbury, or whomever you need to, that the Prophet's tone when it reports on Hermione, and Magical Law Enforcement in general, is hostile. Tell them it needs to stop or they'll face consequences."

"And what would these consequences be?"

"Well, that you'll resign or –"

"That I'll resign?" Ginny interjected, her mouth falling open.

"Not really resign, just threaten to," Harry said quickly. "You have a lot of leverage at the Prophet, Ginny. You saved their sports section. They aren't going to want to let go of you..."

Ginny just stared at him. "So, let me get this straight. You want me to threaten to resign because you believe there is a connection between what the Prophet writes about Hermione and her personal safety?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"What if I don't believe there is a connection?"

Harry could hardly believe she could be that dense. "How can you not believe there is a connection?" he demanded. "Hermione has never received a death threat until today, a day in which her name just happened to be raked across the coals in the Prophet?"

"Harry, I can't stop the Prophet from reporting the facts about Hermione's involvement in the Callahan case. She is part of the story and we wouldn't be a fucking newspaper if we didn't report on her involvement—"

"But you could at least do it in a way that's fair to her!" Harry said, growing increasingly upset with her failure to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation. "This is Hermione we're talking about, Ginny! She's your sister-in-law. You two were pregnant together; you raised our kids together. If there was even the slightest connection between the Prophet and violence against Hermione, you should be pretty fucking upset! You should want to make sure the Prophet isn't instigating violence against her! You should naturally want to help her. I can't believe I even have to mention it to you!"

"Well, maybe that's because you're the only one who cares!" Ginny cried, her face red.

"Are you saying you don't care what happens to Hermione?" Harry said, stunned.

"No!" Ginny said quickly. "I do care. I'm just not going to go overboard in asking journalists to stop being journalists or opinion writers to stop giving their opinions for the sake of an unsubstantiated connection between the Prophet and an attack against Hermione!"

"Then what would you do to protect Hermione?" Harry shot back, fuming.

"I would do exactly what you're doing!" she said, exasperated. "I'd give her a security detail and leave it at that. That's exactly what should be done!"

Harry turned away from her and stared at his plate. He tried to think of some way to show Ginny that something more was needed. Despite his anger, however, he had to acknowledge that all he could legally do was give Hermione a security unit. Yet...a security detail didn't feel like enough. It could never be enough...not for Hermione.

A loud silence passed between them, Harry grinding his teeth as he considered Ginny's words. After a moment, he heard the sound of water hitting paper.

Horried, Harry realized Ginny was crying. Two or three tears had fallen onto the Prophet beneath her. Harry stared at the tearstains for a moment, feeling like an utter asshole and wholly unsure as to what he should do. Slowly he got up and moved towards her.

"Ginny," he said cautiously. Ginny lifted her head. Her eyes were swollen, tears leaking out from the corners.

Harry could no longer be angry. He opened up his arms and Ginny willingly came to him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly, stroking her hair. "I'm sorry, okay?"

Ginny sniffled into his sweater. "This is exactly what I mean," she mumbled.

"What?"

"When Hermione's in danger, you become so irrational. You ask for the impossible. And...and you don't pay attention to me!" she said, devolving into tears again and burying her face in the crook of Harry's arm.

"What do you mean?" Harry said, confused. "I pay attention to you," he protested.

"You didn't once look at me while we were at St. Mungo's," she sniffed mournfully.

"What?"

"It's like you have blinders on..."

"Ginny, you're not making sense. She was just attacked. If you had been attacked, I would have been just as focused on you," Harry reasoned. "It'd be the same for the children. Ron too."

Ginny was silent again, taking several deep breaths. "You would still pay attention to Hermione even if I was unconscious on a hospital bed..." she whispered.

"That's not true," Harry said quickly. "Please, don't be ridiculous, Ginny," Harry pleaded, lifting her head up in his hands. "Hermione is my best friend. I should care if she's hurt, right?"

Ginny stared at him, her eyes still wet. Slowly, she nodded. "Yes," she said reluctantly. "It's not...it's not that I don't w-want you to care about what happens to her...I just want you to remember me in the process," she said, her lips quivering.

Harry leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I always remember you, Ginny, even if it doesn't look like it."

Ginny smiled slightly at this. "That's all I wanted to hear."

Harry hugged her again, glad that this particular conversation was over. He still wanted to press her on getting the Prophet to back down, but he could tell he was not going to get anywhere with that tonight.

Ginny seemed content to let herself be placated by Harry for several more minutes before he finally pulled away.

"I should probably finish eating," Harry said awkwardly, extricating himself. "I'm starving."

She nodded, wiping at her eyes. "All right, darling. I've got some work to do before bed. I should probably message Mum to bring Lily back."

"Okay."

Ginny glanced at him briefly before she picked up the Prophet and headed towards the stairs. Harry listened as her footsteps faded and the house became still.

Harry slowly picked up his half-finished sandwich, feeling his appetite abandon him once again. He set down his food and raised both hands to his face, letting his cool palms lessen the heat still radiating from his skin.

Harry removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose momentarily. Though he was happy that Ginny was now content, he couldn't shake the feeling that he hadn't been completely honest with her, that he had, in fact, lied.

Harry truly wanted to believe he had thought of his wife throughout Hermione's ordeal. Yet, he honestly could not remember consciously thinking of Ginny once while Hermione lay on her bed in St. Mungo's.

It was with some trepidation that Harry stood in front of the Royal London Hospital the next day. It was eight in the morning and the Monday commute was in full swing. Harry was wearing Muggle clothing—slacks and a dark green button-down shirt with a light jacket. He had left his cloak, with its Auror insignia, at home. As Harry stood gazing at the blue glass structure, the task Hermione had charged him with seemed much more difficult than it had the previous day.

Before Harry had left for the hospital, he checked with Ron to make sure Hermione was still in bed, per their arrangement. Hermione was to take the full day off if Harry retrieved her wand from the hospital and invited the doctor who had saved her life to dinner for her birthday. Ron had informed Harry that, indeed, Hermione was in bed, though she was looking through some files, and that Ron would also take the day off work to make sure Hermione did not sneak into the office.

Satisfied, Harry had apparated to the center of London where he currently stood. It was strange to compare Harry's first nightmarish visit to the Royal London Hospital with his second visit. Had Hermione not lost her wand, Harry would have been very glad to never step through the hospital's doors again.

Harry sighed before he crossed the street with a group of Muggles, some clearly hospital employees. A moment later, he stood in the lobby unsure as to how to proceed.

A number of doubts began to plague Harry. How could he even be sure that Hermione had lost her wand in the hospital? It could have been at the crime scene. How did he know that Dr. Srinivasan was even working today? How was he to invite a doctor to dinner with a patient he never remembered treating?

Hermione, Harry growled in his head. He knew she had purposely made it difficult for him, but that did not lessen any of his annoyance with the task that lay ahead.

Hesitantly, Harry moved towards the same information desk he had approached the day before to enquire about Hermione in much different circumstances. The same elderly black woman was manning the computer.

"Uh, excuse me," Harry said awkwardly as he stood before her, hands in his pockets. "I was wondering if you could tell me where I could find Dr. Srinivasan?"

The woman barely glanced at him. "Dr. Amar Srinivasan?"

How many were there? "Uh, yes," Harry replied.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked, peering over glasses.

"Yes," Harry lied as swiftly as possible. "I mean...he is treating one of my family members..."

"What's the patient's name?"

"Uh," Harry stumbled. He quickly tried to think of a last name that had to be a patient of the doctor's. "Um, Jones is the last name?"

Shit. That should have sounded more convincing.

The woman eyed at Harry for second, not amused.

"Sir, do you really have a family member in this hospital?" she demanded.

Under her gaze, Harry's reason left him. "Um...no, ma'am."

"Uh huh. Well, I'm sorry. If you aren't a relative of a patient or have an appointment with Dr. Srinivasan, I can't let you inside."

Harry nodded dumbly, defeated. He briefly thought of Obliviating her memory of the conversation, but he refrained.

That would be illegal. And I don't think that's what Hermione meant by "being creative."

Harry walked towards the exit, shamefaced. The woman watched him leave before she turned to the next visitor. Harry moved behind a pillar and glanced backwards. He waited until the woman's attention was fully devoted to the computer screen in front of her.

Harry was then struck by an idea. He could simply apparate into Hermione's hospital room. The only potential problem was that there could be people inside upon apparating there. But, it was still early. Many patients were likely still asleep, and hopefully there would be no doctors going on rounds yet.

Coming to his decision, Harry checked his surroundings and determined no one was watching. He apparated.

Harry landed in the room that had haunted his thoughts for the last twenty hours. Blessedly, Hermione's hospital room was empty. He sighed in relief. The room was still dark with the blinds drawn. He looked quickly around the room for Hermione's wand. If it was anywhere in the hospital, it was likely here. Harry searched under the small, rolling table where Hermione's clothes and purse had been placed. He looked under the bed and in the bathroom. The wand was nowhere to be seen.

Harry fumbled with his own wand.

"Accio Hermione's wand!" he whispered so that the charm did not reach beyond the room he was in. Nothing happened.

"Shit," Harry muttered. He tried the spell several more times and waited. No wand came flying towards him. It was not in the room.

Agitated, Harry moved towards the door and spread apart the blinds with his fingers in order to look out into the hallway. Two doctors holding coffee in paper cups were speaking softly with one another

as they strode past the door. Further down the corridor, there was a nurses' station where three nurses stood, gossiping amiably.

Harry gently opened the door and slipped into the hallway. He thrust his hands into his pockets and began calmly walking towards the station, as though he might be a friend of one of the patients who had simply decided to take a walk.

Harry was wondering how convincing his act was when a doctor in turquoise scrubs passed him. Harry briefly smiled at him, which the doctor returned. It took Harry a moment to realize it was Dr. Srinivasan.

"Doctor!" Harry called, spinning on his heel. "Dr. Srinivasan?"

The tall Indian man turned. He looked slightly bemused as Harry approached him.

"Hello. Can I help you?" he said kindly to Harry. It was obvious he did not recognize him.

"Um, yes," Harry said, thinking quickly. "My name is Harry...I'm the relative of one of your patients...She lost something very important at the hospital and sent me to find it."

The doctor's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry, sir. That's a question for the hospital's lost-and-found. It's on the first floor." He turned to leave.

"Uh, but doctor," Harry said, desperate. "It was a rather important item. I wonder if you saw it?"

Srinivasan looked slightly annoyed as he turned to face Harry again. "All right," he said quickly. "What was it?"

Harry laughed inwardly. This was going to be difficult.

"Um, well...you see...." Harry began.

The doctor's face grew increasingly impatient, though he was obviously trying to be polite.

"It's sort of...it's like a little piece of wood?" Harry said pathetically. "It's small, maybe slightly over a foot. It has some rather intricate carvings on it."

Harry was pleasantly surprised to see recognition dawning on the doctor's features. He was now eyeing Harry strangely, as though seeing him for the first time.

"That is so interesting you say that!" he exclaimed. "What was your name again?"

"Um, Harry."

"Harry...?" Srinivasan paused, obviously awaiting Harry's surname.

"Oh, um," Harry began, hating how he was sounding more and more like a stuttering fool, "it's Harry Weasley," he lied.

"And the patient's name? Was it your wife?"

Again, Harry hesitated before responding. The doctor did not know Harry's relationship with Hermione. Would it make sense to say he was simply her friend or her brother-in-law? Or was this the sort of errand that only a husband would do? Conflicted, Harry went with instinct.

"Yes, my wife."

"What's her name?"

"Hermione."

"Hermione..." Srinivasan mused, rolling the name around his mouth as though he had never heard it before. A moment later, the doctor stepped forward and indicated that Harry should follow.

Delighted that they were finally getting somewhere, Harry was surprised to see the doctor stop before the nurses' station. Srinivasan moved to the other side of the counter.

"Sorry, could I use it for a second, Sheryl?" Srinivasan said to one of the nurses. A large woman quickly got up and moved out of the way

so that the doctor could take her seat. She moved towards the far end of the counter and the other two nurses followed after her.

Harry watched with growing trepidation as the doctor muttered, "Hermione.... Weasley," while typing something into the strange contraption.

"Ah, yes!" Srinivasan said. "Hermione Weasley. Your wife was in room 466...she had a head trauma, which we were able to handle pretty well. Says she got thirty-four stitches, yikes! I don't know why I don't remember her case..." he said confused. "Hmmm, this is odd..."

"What?" Harry said, quickly. Harry was already cursing himself that he had overlooked the shiny machine that seemed to hold a record of Hermione's visit to the hospital. He supposed it was impossible to Oblivate a piece of Muggle technology.... still, this would make things more complicated.

"Well, her file was never closed," Srinivasan said seriously. "It says here that she was admitted yesterday...she can't have been released yet, not with thirty-four stitches in her head...yet, she's not here... I would have seen her on my round."

Harry felt this was the moment for a convenient lie. "No, no," Harry said rapidly. "That can't be right. Hermione actually wanted to invite you to dinner, as a thank you for treating her...but you see she's completely better now. She was admitted to the hospital several weeks ago."

"How many weeks ago?" Srinivasan asked, confused.

"Uh..." Harry quickly calculated how long it would likely take a Muggle to recover from Hermione's injuries. "A month ago?"

"Wow. Your wife is a remarkably fast healer."

Fuck. "Yes, I suppose she is..." Harry said, lamely. He watched the doctor's expression anxiously.

Thankfully, Srinivasan returned his attention to the computer screen. "Well, this must be a typo...it happens. I'll just change it now." He

began typing faster. "Don't tell anyone about this or we'll likely be getting some lawsuits," Srinivasan said half jokingly.

Harry laughed a little too loudly.

Finally, Srinivasan finished with the frustrating device and stood up. "The reason I checked your wife's file, Mr. Weasley, was because I wanted to see if I had the right room." The doctor moved out from behind the counter and quickly motioned for Harry to follow him. As they passed Hermione's original room, Srinivasan spoke again.

"You see...something strange happened the other day. I somehow ended up in a room... I believe it was your wife's old room. I'm not really sure what I was doing in there, to be honest...but then I saw exactly what you described: some sort of intricately designed piece of wood. It was very pretty. No one was checked into the room so I knew it didn't belong to a current patient, so I simply pocketed it so I could show it to my son later. I left it in my locker here at the hospital."

The doctor laughed. "How strange that I should find your wife's.... item... a full month after she was admitted here!"

"We're just lucky, I guess," Harry said, smiling slightly. Harry was simply rejoicing in the fact that Dr. Srinivasan seemed content to take the incident in stride, without asking too many questions.

Srinivasan pushed through a set of double doors and escorted Harry down a narrower hallway. On his left and right, Harry saw locker rooms for doctors wearing different colored scrubs. Finally, Srinivasan stopped before one of the last doors in the hallway and stepped inside.

It was a mostly empty locker room, like all the others. Two other doctors were changing out of their regular clothing and into turquoise scrubs identical to Dr. Srinivasan's.

"Amar?" a redheaded woman said, tying the drawstring of her pants. "Who's this?"

"Don't worry, Rachel," Srinivasan said, smiling. "This is just the husband of one of my former patients. Special case."

The woman looked suspiciously at Harry before she nodded and turned away. Though Harry knew nothing of hospital etiquette, he guessed that his presence in a hospital locker room was unusual. In any case, Harry followed Srinivasan to the back of the room.

He watched as the doctor fiddled with a padlock and swung open a locker. He gently removed what Harry recognized as Hermione's wand. Harry held out his hand.

"Here you go, Mr. Weasley. I hope your wife will be happy to have it back," Srinivasan said smiling. He briefly looked down at the wand in his hand, a line forming between his eyebrows. "Actually, do you mind my asking what it is?"

Harry grimaced slightly. Fortunately, the doctor did not see Harry's expression as he was still rolling Hermione's wand between his fingers. "Well, it's sort of..."

"It's rather beautiful, isn't? I like these leaf carvings on the side. It's so intricate for such a small piece of wood." The doctor laughed. "It's sort of like a magic wand, you know? But without all the sparkles..."

Harry laughed too loudly again. He wracked his mind as to what in a Muggle household might resemble Hermione's wand. Absolutely nothing came to mind.

The doctor finally looked up, waiting for Harry's response.

Harry tried again. "Well, you know, it's sort of a like...it's like a family heirloom?" he supplied. "It's just really important to Hermione...been in the family for years."

The doctor looked strangely at Harry, but thankfully chose not to press him. Harry's eyes widened as Srinivasan playfully swished the wand in the air before he placed it in Harry's hand. Harry pocketed it.

"Well, I'm glad I could help you in recovering it, Mr. Weasley," the doctor said, closing his locker. "Now, I think you mentioned dinner?"

Harry inwardly sighed with relief. "Yes. How does September 19th work for you?"

By one that afternoon, Harry was standing in the Ministry Atrium with Hermione's security detail: Yvain More and Cassiopeia Burke. Inside Harry's cloak, Hermione's wand was tucked in next to his own. The three Aurors walked towards the first available fireplace and moments later, they were standing in Ron and Hermione's small parlor.

The parlor had a gleaming rosewood floor and the room was filled with flowers that perpetually replenished themselves. There was a dusted rose-colored couch in the center of the room and several other chairs scattered around the space. The afternoon sun came in through a large bay window to Harry's right.

Harry gingerly shook the soot off his robes, making sure the residue landed in the hearth, before he stepped out. "Ron? Hermione?" he called.

Ron came skidding into the parlor a moment later. He was holding a half-eaten bagel. "Hey, Harry!" he said cheerfully. He looked at the two wizards behind Harry and smiled. "Oh, so these are Hermione's new bodyguards, huh?"

"Yes," Harry said, motioning the two younger Aurors to step forward. "This is Cassiopeia Burke. She goes by 'Cassy.' And this is Yvain More. They are two of my most talented young Aurors."

Ron switched the bagel to his left hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you both," Ron said kindly, extending his arm.

Cassiopeia politely shook his hand, but Yvain looked slightly star-struck and held onto Ron's hand a bit longer than necessary.

"It's such an honor to meet you, Mr. Weasley," Yvain said ecstatically. "I never in my life thought I'd-I'd meet you personally, sir. It's a huge honor..."

Ron gave him an appreciative grin. "Ah, I can tell I'm going to like you," Ron said, laughing.

"How is Hermione doing?" Harry interjected, looking towards the staircase in the foyer.

Ron took a bite of his bagel before answering. "She's fine. Like I told you, she's been doing some work but she hasn't left the house.... Did you get the wand back?"

Harry laughed. "Yes, and it wasn't easy."

"And the Muggle?"

"Coming to dinner the 19th."

Ron pursed his lips slightly. "Hmph. Well, that should be interesting..."

"Yes...um, Ron?"

At that moment, however, the sound of footsteps reached Harry. Harry quickly strode into the foyer, the others following behind him.

As Harry expected, Hermione was descending the stairs. He was happy to see that she was still wearing pajamas—light flannel pants with her old Head Girl T-shirt—which he hoped meant that she had been resting in her bed. The shirt was slightly tighter on her now, stretched alluringly on her petite frame. She gave a hesitant smile as she looked at the small group assembled in the foyer.

She skipped down the last few steps as if to show how well she had recovered.

"Well, hello Harry," she said sarcastically, coming to stand before him. "Did you get my wand?" she asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, smiling. "And you'll get it in just a second. First, let me introduce you to your security team." Harry stepped to the side to reveal the two Aurors behind him.

"This is Yvain More," Harry said. He tried to ignore the appreciative look Hermione gave the tall, blond wizard. "And this is Cassiopeia Burke. She goes by 'Cassy,'" he repeated.

Hermione smiled at them both. "Pleasure," she said simply.

There was an awkward pause until Ron spoke.

"Um, so Harry...the Harpies game is on. Do you think you need me for this?"

"No, yeah. You can go. What's the score by the way?" Harry asked, his interest naturally piqued by his wife's former team.

"120-90 to the Harpies."

"Close," Harry sighed.

"Yeah," Ron said, already edging towards the back of the house where the entertainment room was located. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Okay, maybe I can come watch with you in a bit..." Harry said, turning back towards Hermione and the Aurors. Yvain looked like he seriously wanted to join Ron as well.

"All right, mate!" Ron called from down the hallway. He disappeared around the corner.

"So, Hermione," Harry said seriously. "I'm going to walk you through the ground rules of how this works. Yvain and Cassy will be on a twenty-four-security assignment for you starting now. That means they will be available to you at any time of the day if you need to leave either the Ministry or the house.

Most importantly, you are not to leave the Ministry or your house without them. On a routine basis, they will apparate with you to the Ministry every morning. In the evenings, they will escort you back to the house. Technically, they will be off duty from that point, but if you need to leave the house again, simply send them your patronus fifteen minutes in advance so they have some notice before they come meet you."

"And what if I go to your house or the Burrow?" Hermione questioned, folding her arms around herself.

"At the Burrow, they'll stand guard outside the house. If you come to my house, just inform Yvain and Cassy. I've already told them that there's no need to stand guard when you are with me."

Hermione might have rolled her eyes slightly.

"Also, I'm setting up a non-Apparation zone inside your house," Harry said. He saw Hermione's brow furrow, so he quickly offered an explanation. "That means no one can directly apparate into the house. If they think of apparating into the house, they'll simply end up on the front porch. That way, you'll have the power to determine who you let into the house or not..."

"I know what a non-Apparation zone is, Harry...it's only in the first chapter of Hogwarts, A History."

Harry smiled. It had been a long time since he'd heard that reference. "Okay, okay," Harry said, placating her. "But, I'll set it up in such a way that you and Ron can still disappearate from inside the house. That way, you two won't be inconvenienced."

Hermione nodded.

"Does this all make sense?" Harry asked. Yvain was gazing distractedly around the foyer. Cassy was simply watching Harry and Hermione's conversation.

"Yes, yes," Hermione sighed, slightly agitated. "Is that all?"

Harry momentarily hesitated. He cleared his throat. "There's one more thing. I'm going to put an Apparation-tracking spell on you..."

He stopped upon seeing Hermione's face.

"Excuse me?" she said, with a contemptuous expression.

"An Apparation-tracking spell," Harry repeated, grimacing. "It's to make sure you don't apparate without first informing Yvain and Cassy."

Hermione nodded slowly, her eyes narrow slits. "And I'm guessing you'll be the one receiving the notification of whether I've apparated without authorization?"

"Um, yes...is that a problem?"

Hermione didn't respond. Instead, she turned towards the two young Aurors.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't usually do this when I've met people so recently, but would you excuse Harry and I for a moment? I have to have a few words with him. You might as well disapparate. This may take a while."

The two Aurors exchanged a glance and then turned to look at Harry. He nodded curtly and Yvain and Cassy moved towards the front door. They disapparated.

Once they were alone, Hermione marched into the parlor. Harry followed her.

"What's the problem?" he asked, nervous.

Hermione took a deep breath before she spoke. "What exactly do you think you are doing, Harry?"

"What?"

"An Apparation-tracking spell?" she said caustically.

Harry took a few steps towards the fireplace and then turned to face her. "It's necessary, Hermione."

"Why? Because you don't trust me to follow the rules for my own security?" she accused.

Yes, Harry thought to himself.

"It's normal procedure, Hermione. When we have a high-profile Ministry official who needs protection...sometimes we impose an Apparation-tracking spell."

Hermione simply stared at him. She looked disappointed. "Wow, Harry. I never thought you'd openly lie about it."

"Hermione, I'm not lying—" Harry said, wishing he could meet her eyes.

Hermione interrupted him. "Harry, I'm a lawyer. I practice criminal law. Do you really think I don't know what the Auror Department is authorized to do with regards to personal security?"

Harry sighed, closing his eyes. He had been afraid of this. He had foolishly hoped that Hermione might have simply forgotten. Unlikely, Harry thought ruefully. She was probably brushing up on wizarding security law this morning in bed.

"Hermione.... yes, it isn't exactly standard procedure," Harry admitted, "but I would really appreciate it if you allowed me to place the spell on you."

Hermione considered him for a moment. "You should have asked me like that in the first place. But," she said, hesitating slightly, "the answer is still 'no.'"

Harry turned towards the mantelpiece. He began fiddling with the corner of a picture frame that held a Muggle photograph of Rose and Hugo with Hermione's parents. He sighed again.

"Hermione," Harry said, still refusing to look at her. "Would you please just do it for me?" he pleaded desperately. "It would grant me that extra peace of mind that you aren't endangering yourself. I know you follow the rules most of the time, Hermione. But, I know you. There will be times when you'll want to sneak away somewhere...maybe for something trivial...and you'll think you are in no danger and that's exactly the situation I am most of afraid of," Harry said, his voice wavering slightly despite himself. He took a deep breath.

"That's exactly what happened yesterday," Harry continued. "You thought you were just going for a pleasant walk and look what happened. I'm sorry.... It's not that I don't trust you. I just need to know you aren't going to cheat on this...not when the stakes are so high...not when your life is in danger."

"No, Harry," Hermione said forcefully. "It's simply not standard procedure! Why should I have my freedom of movement infringed just because you don't trust me to keep my security detail informed? You're going overboard, yet again."

"Yet again," Harry repeated, angry. "What do you mean, 'yet again?'"

Harry heard Hermione take a few steps towards him. She sat herself down on the couch, crossing her legs underneath her.

"Harry," she said calmly. "I know you too. You're trying to do everything you can to protect me, but in doing so you're crossing some legal boundaries. What kind of response do you expect me to have when you say you're going put an Apparation-tracking spell on me? Those are used on criminals. Look, I recognize the fact that you want to protect me, but you've got do it in your capacity as the head of the Auror Department. You cannot take it so personally..."

Harry didn't say anything for a long moment. He continued to stare, unseeing, at the photograph in front of him. He reached up and briefly rubbed his temple.

"So," Harry said, his voice dangerously low. "This is solely a business transaction to you, Hermione? I can only care about your safety as an Auror, not as your fucking best friend?" His hand slammed down on the mantel, shaking several of the pictures.

Hermione stared at him.

Harry rounded on Hermione. "Why do you make it so difficult for me to protect you!"

Hermione stood up. She looked unmoved by Harry's outburst. "Because you are acting like it's your personal duty to protect me!" she cried. "You are acting just like you did at Hogwarts when you said you wouldn't allow anyone else to endanger themselves because of you."

She took a steadying breath. " But this isn't about you anymore, Harry. I've managed to endanger myself all on my own this time. I've made myself a public menace under my own volition, thank you very much."

"That is not at all relevant," Harry fumed.

"Isn't it?" Hermione returned. "Whenever someone you care about is in danger, Harry, you somehow think it's your sole responsibility to protect them. I think I once called it your 'saving-people-thing.'" She sighed. Her voice grew softer. "But, Harry I won't stand to be the benefactor of your protection this time. What I am doing now...what I

am fighting for with this Callahan case...this is all my own doing. This is my mission. I want you to help me, not hinder me in my efforts—just as I helped you all those years ago..."

She trailed off. Harry stared into her unfathomable eyes. Deep ochre. Determined. Concerned for him, even as she was pushing him away.

Harry had heard Hermione say something similar to him in the past, in their fifth year at Hogwarts. Then, she had been petrified to inform Harry that he all too often "played the hero." Now, she was no longer a fifteen-year-old girl. She was a woman, a fearless and stubborn woman at that.

Harry felt his resolve weaken slightly. "Hermione, I just want...I need you to be safe."

She smiled beautifully. "I know, darling. I consider myself very lucky that you care about me that much..."

Harry didn't let her finish. He took a few steps towards her, his face anguished. He seized her and pulled her into his arms.

"You don't understand the half of it, Hermione," he whispered, his face buried in her hair. "You don't know what I went through...what I had to do to find you yesterday. You were...you were so weak and broken...I thought for a moment that you were gone. Can you understand how frightened I was? Hermione, I never want to go through that again. Promise me. Promise me you'll never let that happen."

Hermione's calm façade finally collapsed. She leaned back and gazed at Harry, entranced. "Harry, darling...I'm-I'm so sorry you had to see that." She lifted her hand and gently pressed it to the side of his face. "I know I gave you hell yesterday. I know you're trying to keep me safe. I promise you, I will not give the slip to my Aurors, okay? I promise."

"Thank you," Harry said emphatically. He kissed her cheek and hugged her tightly again. She returned the kiss. They held each other for a few minutes, Hermione gently stroking his back. After a moment, Harry said, "You had better keep your promise, Hermione Granger."

Hermione laughed softly, still holding onto him tightly. "What can I say short of an Unbreakable Vow, Harry? I promise to follow all of your silly rules. I promise."

"An Unbreakable Vow would be nice," Harry said teasingly, his breath brushing her neck.

"Hahaha," Hermione sighed. She slowly extricated herself from Harry's grasp and moved towards the couch, bringing Harry with her. They both sat down their arms still intertwined.

"Now that we've got that all settled," Hermione said matter-of-factly, "where is my wand? I miss it."

Harry reached into his cloak and produced the wand. He glanced at it briefly, remembering that, for a time, it had been his own wand—that they had shared it between them.

He rubbed the wand briefly against his robes before handing it to her. She took it back gratefully, examining it from several angles.

"You would not believe the...awkwardness...I endured retrieving that," Harry informed her.

Hermione giggled. "Yeah? What happened?"

"Well, let's just say that we're very lucky that the doctor who saved your life didn't ask too many questions..."

"How do you mean?" Hermione asked, interested. She was lazily waving her wand in the air, a few bubbles emerging from its tip.

"I thought Durkheim and I had Obliviated everyone who knew about your time in the hospital, but there was that damned Muggle machine...it had a record of your stay."

"What machine?" Hermione questioned. "Was it a computer?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Hermione laughed. "That would present a problem, wouldn't it? My parents have one. It seems terribly useful."

"In this instance, though, it nearly blew my entire story."

"Which was?"

"Well, it's hard to invite a doctor to dinner with a patient he just treated yesterday. I had to tell him there must have been a mistake in your record and that you really had been treated a month ago."

"And he believed that?"

"Yeah."

Hermione laughed again. "Well, good. And he's coming for my birthday?"

"Yes. I told him we'd be having a nice dinner here on the 19th at seven o'clock. He's bringing his wife and his son. The boy is about Hugo's age."

"Oh, perfect," Hermione said, turning to face him. "So—" she stopped upon seeing Harry grimace. "What's wrong?"

"I, um...I forgot to mention one detail..." Harry said, suddenly extremely nervous.

"What's that?"

"Well, when you were in the hospital yesterday...I told the doctor that you were my...wife. You know, just so they would let me see you."

Hermione nodded, her eyes slightly wider than normal. "But you Obliviated them, Harry. He wouldn't remember that detail the second time you saw him."

"I know.... but, I sort of slipped up." Harry said, looking at his hands. "I wasn't sure if it made sense to say I was your friend or your brother-in-law. So, I accidentally said I was your husband, again..."

Harry was afraid to look up. He was startled when he heard Hermione laugh.

"Are you serious?" she said, giggling. "That's hilarious! So, the doctor is coming to dinner and he thinks you and I are married?"

Harry shrugged, smiling with relief. "Yeah, basically."

"Oh, wow. This is going to complicate things, if things weren't complicated enough already," she said, shaking her head.

"I'm really sorry, Hermione."

"Oh, don't apologize," she said, briefly leaning against him. "We'll figure something out. The important thing is that you invited him and that I have my wand back. You performed wonderfully, Harry," she said pressing another kiss to his cheek.

Harry felt his face grow warm. He felt strangely delighted that Hermione was not upset about the confusion his mistake had caused.

"What are you two laughing about?" a voice said from the doorway.

It was Ron.

Harry and Hermione separated.

"Oh, Harry was just telling me about his visit to the hospital today," Hermione said.

"Oh yeah?" Ron replied. "Harry told me the Muggles will be coming to dinner."

"Yeah," Harry said, looking anywhere but Ron.

"Well, we've done it a few times before. Should be fine," Ron said, noncommittal.

"Yes," Hermione said awkwardly. She stood up to face Ron. "Um, darling...Harry sort of had to invent a reason as to why he was there to get my wand..."

"Yeah?" Ron said, smiling.

"Yeah," Hermione continued. "You see, um...this may cause some confusion for our dinner party. Harry said...well, he said that he was my husband."

Ron's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I'm sorry. What?"

Chapter 9: Handfasting

Considering the unusual circumstances of Hermione's thirty-eighth birthday, Harry thought things were going surprisingly well.

Understandably, when Ron learned that the Muggle doctor believed Harry and Hermione were married, his initial reaction was confusion.

"What do you mean he thinks you're married?" Ron had asked.

Hermione looked to Harry, her eyes pleading.

"Well, it's like this," Harry began awkwardly. "I didn't have much time to think and I reckoned that since I was inviting him to such a personal event, I didn't know if it made sense to say I was her best friend..."

"You could've just said you were her brother-in-law," Ron said, folding his arms.

"Yeah, I know," said Harry, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I-I wasn't thinking."

"It's not Harry's fault, Ron," Hermione piped up. "He had to say something. The doctor was the only one who knew where my wand was. Harry was more focused on getting my wand back than making sure his story was completely accurate."

"I guess," Ron said, looking somewhat disgruntled. "What are we going to do for the party, then? Oblivate the Muggles when they come in?"

"Why would we do that?" Hermione asked, alarmed.

"Well, to set things straight," Ron said exasperatedly, as though his suggestion was painfully obvious. "We'll Oblivate them so they'll know I'm your husband."

Hermione's eyebrows drew together.

"But that's illegal, Ron!" she exclaimed. "We can't Oblivate three Muggles just because we messed up a dinner invitation. Not to

mention the fact that the doctor has already been Obliviated once. Multiple Oblivations can lead to memory loss."

"That's pretty rare," Ron said, frowning.

"I know, but he's a doctor, Ronald. They actually save Muggle lives. We can't have him forgetting things here and there. Besides, that doesn't change the fact that it's illegal," Hermione stressed.

Harry watched the dialogue between his two best friends, his own face somehow uncharacteristically warm. A moment later, Ron shrugged indifferently.

"All right, what would you have us do then?" he asked. "Harry can't very well say he was mistaken about being married to you. Are you and Harry going to pretend to be married or something?"

Hermione looked between Harry and Ron, worrying her lip. Harry stared at her. Her response, in that moment, seemed very important to him...

"I guess that might be our best option..." she said, cautiously.

A moment later, Harry was surprised to hear Ron laugh. "I actually think that could be interesting, if you guys think you can pull it off..."

Harry stared at Ron, making sure he was serious.

"But, hold on," Ron continued, "if Harry's going to be your husband, what's my excuse for being at the party?"

"Um," Hermione paused, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "You could just be a friend, you know?"

"And Ginny?" Harry interjected, remembering, seemingly for the first time, that she would also be there.

"Well, she can still be my sister, obviously," Ron mused. "Just say we're both family friends or something."

"Do you think Ginny will be okay with that?" Hermione asked Harry.

"Sure..." Harry lied. "If I explain it to her, I'm sure she'll be fine with it."

Ron laughed again. "I take it all back. This could actually be fun. Can I have like a completely different personality or something?"

"What 'completely different personality' do you want, Ronald?" asked Hermione skeptically.

"I don't know. I've never thought about it before..." Ron said wonderingly.

Ron brought his thumb to his chin, as though deep in thought. Harry laughed despite himself.

Hermione let out an exaggerated sigh. "Okay, so with the four of us and the doctor's family, that puts us at seven people. With Hugo and Lily, that's nine." Hermione walked over a side table and picked up a pen and a piece of parchment. "We'll have to brief the kids on what they can't say to the Srinivasans, of course."

Harry nodded. "But, they've had dinners with Muggles at the house before. They should be fine."

"Then it's settled!" said Hermione happily, scribbling away.

"Wait," Ron said seriously. "There's going to be six wizards at this dinner and three Muggles. Do you think we can pull off not revealing anything?"

"Of course," Hermione snorted, looking up from the parchment. "Have you suddenly forgotten I grew up as a Muggle, Ronald?"

"Yeah, like thirty years ago," Ron said smirking.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you're less like a Muggle than you think, is all."

"Are you saying I can't convince them I'm a Muggle?" she asked testily.

"All I'm saying is that with six of us, we're bound to slip up at some point," Ron replied evenly.

"We've had Muggles over before..." Hermione began.

"Yeah, like your parents. Like all the wizarding fellows you keep bringing over to the house. All of those people know about magic, Hermione. When was the last time you had dinner with a Muggle who knew nothing about wizards?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it.

Harry had to admit Ron had a point. The last dinner he himself had had completely with Muggles was with Dudley's family. Even then, Dudley knew what Harry was, so there was no need to pretend.

"I'm just saying I think we need a Muggle translator," Ron finished smugly.

"A translator?" Harry repeated.

"Yeah. Just someone who can translate whatever crazy shit we'll eventually say into Muggle."

Harry frowned. "What does that even mean?"

"No, Ron's right," said Hermione. "That's actually a good idea."

"Always the tone of surprise with you." Ron rolled his eyes.

"And I know just who it should be!" Hermione said, ignoring Ron's comment. "Daniel would be perfect at it."

"Daniel?" Harry asked. "The wizarding fellow?"

"Yes," Hermione said excitedly. "He's just naturally quick on the uptake, and oh! He'll just be so much fun at dinner!"

Daniel Marin was a former wizarding fellow with the Ministry exchange program Hermione had created five years ago. In his mid-thirties, Daniel was gay and a Muggle architect. He had applied to the program in order to learn about magical building construction. While Daniel was a Muggle, his mother was a Squib, so he had

always known about the magical world. When he and Hermione met two years ago, they had instantly hit it off.

Thus, it was decided that Daniel would be invited to Hermione's birthday dinner, pushing their number of guests up to ten. Daniel would be able to cover for their accidental references to magic and fill in the awkward silences that could occur if the Muggle family referred to something none of them understood.

Over the next two weeks, Hermione set about "Muggle-proofing" the entire house for the dinner party. This meant hiding all the magical objects and deactivating a number of spells in the house.

A special problem arose regarding the magical photographs. Usually, wizards are advised to stun their photographs when Muggles come to visit so that the pictures can no longer move. But since Harry and Hermione would be faux-married, Hermione had to hide the photographic evidence that Ron was her husband.

This led to a number of amusing conversations in which Hermione pleaded with photographic versions of Ron to hide themselves behind their picture frames. When the disgruntled Rons complied, Hermione would stun the picture so that its occupants were frozen in place. Ron was not happy about this, but he seemed to take it in stride.

Ron, for his part, removed the magical plants from the conservatory and deconstructed the Quidditch hoops from the backyard. Harry had even spied him reading a book George had given Ron for his wedding. It was entitled *Muggle-Proofing Your Home: What to Do When the In-Laws Come to Visit*.

As Harry left the house after one of the group's Wednesday dinners, he glanced at a picture that had recently been stunned. It showed Hermione sitting in the grass at Kensington Gardens with Hugo and Rose (Ron was stuck behind the picture frame). Hermione was wearing a bright yellow sundress. Her bare arm was lazily draped around Rose. Harry stared at the picture for a moment, trying to convince himself this was a good idea.

Hermione as my wife.

The thought did not feel strange in itself—rather, it made Harry feel strange. An intoxicating mixture of dread and anticipation. Harry felt very uneasy about it...though, he couldn't say he disliked it.

Despite preparations for the dinner party, Harry did not see Hermione much throughout the next two weeks. After the attack, she had re-submerged herself in her work, quickly dispelling any rumors that the Prophet had impacted her zeal for the Callahan case.

True to his word, Harry kept the knowledge of Hermione's attack to a small group of Aurors. Unfortunately, the evidence from the attack had provided no additional clues as to who her assailant might be. Harry had even personally visited the site of the attack. All he had found was a slightly darkened spot on the pavement where Hermione's blood had been vigorously scrubbed away. Without any further clues, Harry returned his attention to the preventative measures he had taken for her security, namely Hermione's security detail.

To her credit, Hermione had not once complained about the two young Aurors who now shadowed her every move. As Harry had instructed, Yvain and Cassy were at her side whenever Hermione left the Ministry. Both Aurors had confirmed to Harry that Hermione was keeping them well informed about her travel plans.

Harry was pleased with this development. Since their argument, both Harry and Hermione had attempted to be more considerate of the other's position. Hermione's combative attitude towards her security had lessened slightly, and Harry tried to be less conspicuous about his need to keep her safe.

Unbeknownst to Yvain and Cassy, however, they were actually providing Harry with a window into Hermione's life. Harry hated to admit it, but he found it deeply frustrating to be away from Hermione for long periods of time. He was used to eating lunch with her two or three times a week. Now, he was lucky if he passed her in the hallway. Naturally, Harry felt somewhat adrift without her.

With Hermione so consumed in the Callahan case, Harry was left to find solace in his daily reports on Hermione's security from Yvain and Cassy. Thus, when September 19th finally came, Harry was exceptionally eager to see his overworked best friend again.

"Mornin' Gwen," Harry greeted his assistant as he ascended the dais to his office at eight that morning.

"Good morning, sir," the younger woman said, surprised, taking in Harry's cheery disposition.

"Any developments since last night?" Harry asked, stopping before her desk. He picked up two files and a copy of the Daily Prophet.

"No, sir."

"All right," Harry said, looking down at the front page. "I'll be taking a half-day today, so send out a group notice that if anyone needs to meet with me, they should do so before lunch, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Harry smiled at her—he seemed unable to stop smiling today—and Gwen's eyes widened slightly. Considering Harry's mood since Hermione's attack, this show of friendliness could be considered rare.

Tossing the files onto his desk a moment later, Harry unfurled the Daily Prophet. He was glad to see nothing relating to the Callahan case on the front page. Sitting down, he flipped towards the sports section. It was then, however, that something caught his eye.

A small notice at the bottom of page four displayed a moving picture of several Muggle doctors. Beneath the photo, a short paragraph read:

Three doctors (the equivalent of Healers in the non-magical world) were inducted into St. Mungo's Muggle-Consultative Exchange Program this past Monday. The three doctors, all from the Greater London area, will participate in an intensive, two-year training program with St. Mungo's Healers before their return to the Muggle world. The three doctors specialize in the Muggle medical areas of orthopedics, cardiology, and neurology.

Harry looked back at the picture. He could barely make out the doctors' faces, the photo was so small. Yet, their names were printed in the caption: Drs. Roger Olmseed, Violet Bromberg, and Alexander Peck.

Glancing at the paragraph again, Harry's eyes landed on the word "neurology." Harry was rubbish at Muggle science—even when he thought he was a Muggle—but this word seemed familiar. He had heard it in grade school, right? Or perhaps in the TV medical dramas Aunt Petunia liked so much...

Neurology. It had something to do with brains, he was sure.

A sudden thought struck Harry.

At 11:30, Harry was strolling towards Hermione's department. Upon entering the Head Office of Magical Law Enforcement, a number of lawyers called out to Harry in greeting. He briefly waved at them before he proceeded towards Hermione's office, which was at the very back of the large anteroom. Seeing that the door to her office was open, Harry smiled, his footsteps quickening.

Stopping before her office, Harry took a deep breath.

"Hey, birthday girl," Harry called, swinging around the lintel of her door.

Hermione looked up from her desk. "Hey, you," she smiled.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I?"

"Never," Hermione said, waving him inside.

Harry stepped into the office. Since Hermione was one of the most prominent lawyers in the department, her office was actually quite large. You'd never know it, however, from all the stacks of files strewn across the room. Large accordion files occupied most of the chairs. Hermione's desk itself was a small fortress of parchment. Harry gingerly picked his way over to her.

The office itself was windowless, wood-paneled room. There was a rather nice candelabra hanging from the ceiling and just like Harry's office, several pictures hung on the walls.

Against the far wall, there was a large and stunning magical painting of a wide river running through a forest. Hermione told Harry that the painting changed with the circumstances of the owner. But, Harry

had never seen the image change in the four years Hermione had owned it. It still showed the same solitary young woman dangling her feet in the river's slow current

The rest of the pictures were more personal in nature: Ron and Hermione's wedding portrait, an exhausted Hermione holding baby Rose, Hermione and Ginny at Christmas. There was another picture of Hermione and Harry at Hogwarts during Hermione's seventh year. Harry had briefly visited his former school for an Auror assignment.

"How's the research coming?" Harry asked, stepping over a final accordion file.

"Oh, you know," Hermione replied, a line forming between her brows as she stood up, still reading a roll of parchment.

Harry smiled at the way she bit her lip as she read. She was wearing a light-blue satin blouse tucked into a sensible black skirt.

"Well, put the work down, darling. I have a proposition for you," said Harry, lowering himself onto a chair.

"Yeah? What's that?" Hermione said, still not looking up. She leaned over to scribble something in the margin of the parchment.

"Well, today's your birthday."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, well spotted," she said sarcastically.

"You're still taking off early from work, right?"

Hermione set down her quill and flopped back into her chair. "Mmhmm," she responded, briefly closing her eyes. "I'll leave around two or so. I have to get started on supper for the party."

"Right," Harry said chuckling. It had already been decided that Hermione, Ron, and Harry would all cook the dinner together. No one trusted Ron's cooking enough to leave it all to him. A dinner for ten was a tall order for anyone, and thus would be especially challenging for Ron.

"Why do you ask?" Hermione questioned.

Harry heard a clunk, clunk as Hermione kicked off her shoes behind the desk.

"Well," Harry began, hoping his plan sounded as good as it had in his head. "I was thinking, since we're having the children with us tonight—do you think it would be nice if we invited the Muggle boy at St. Mungo's to come to dinner as well?"

"The Muggle boy? You mean Duncan?" Hermione asked, referring to the twelve-year-old whose family had been attacked by Callahan.

"Yes."

"I didn't know you knew him," Hermione said, surprised.

"I met him while you were in St. Mungo's. We had an interesting talk, I guess you could say."

"Did you?" Hermione said, smiling widely. "He really is such a sweet boy, and poor thing..." she said, her face dropping, "his mother not remembering him and he seems a bit...well, lonely. He's the only Muggle child there, of course..."

"That's what I thought," said Harry. "I think it would be good for him to get outside of the hospital, at least for a day. He can play with Hugo and Lily at the house while we cook. They know how to interact with Muggles better than most magical children..."

Hermione shrugged, frowning slightly. "I don't think it's hard to interact with Muggle children. They basically want to do the same things as any magical kid. It's just that wizard children are raised believing they should avoid all Muggles."

Harry smiled slightly, agreeing with her. Yet, it was just these sorts of opinions that seemed to get Hermione in trouble.

"So, you think we should invite him?" Harry asked.

"Yes! It's a wonderful idea!" Hermione said, beaming at him. "I'm so glad you thought of it!"

"Good," Harry said, his neck growing warm. "I'll run down to St. Mungo's and see if they'll let him out..."

Hermione smirked. "They will. If you're the one asking, they will."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Well, that's settled then," he said, getting to his feet. "I'll leave you to it...Good luck with the research."

Hermione nodded, though she seemed lost in a sudden thought.

She called out to him just as he reached the door. Harry turned on his heel at the sound of her voice.

"Harry?" she said, looking at him anxiously. "We're going to be married tonight. Are you ready?"

Harry stared at her. She was standing again, twisting her fingers in front of her. He grinned.

"I'm ready. I'm looking forward to it, actually."

Hermione smiled at his words, looking down. "Well, if I had to pretend to be married to anyone, I'm glad it's you."

"Thanks, I guess," Harry chuckled. "Ron's going to have a field day with this, you know."

"I know," Hermione laughed. "It's certainly going to be an interesting night..."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, briefly passing a hand through his hair. He had difficulty meeting her eyes. "Well, I'll see you?"

"Yeah," Hermione said, raising her hand.

"Oh, and hey," Harry called, his hand on the doorknob.

Hermione looked up at him expectantly.

"Happy birthday."

After collecting his things from the AD, Harry apparated into the lobby of St. Mungo's. A group of four or five Healers immediately

swarmed around him when they realized who he was and escorted him to the Janus Thicketry Ward on the fourth floor.

"Does anyone know where I can find Healer Waltham?" Harry asked the group as they moved down the hallway towards the gleaming silver doors.

"He should be inside the ward, Chief Potter!" a young blonde Healer answered excitedly.

"Yes, he's with the Muggles," another Healer called out.

The Healers broke out into low laughter. Harry's brow furrowed slightly.

Stopping before the doors, Harry extricated himself from the group.

"I'm sorry," he said, quickly. "I have to speak to Healer Waltham alone. Thanks for showing me the way."

The group of Healers reluctantly departed at his words and Harry was left alone. He looked at the silver sign above the door and stepped inside.

Little had changed. The same two patients were in the main part of the room. They looked up curiously when Harry entered but did not seem to recognize him. Harry walked between a row of beds towards the white curtain that separated the Camerons from the rest of the ward.

Hesitantly, Harry separated the barrier.

Here too, things were essentially the same. Mrs. Cameron was sitting in an easy chair by her daughter's bed, where her daughter Nicole was lying. There was no longer a fuzzy, blue cloud of spellwork above her head. Mr. Cameron was sitting in a hospital chair in front of a television. The picture quality was very bad and the sound was almost completely muffled by static.

Duncan was not there.

Mr. and Mrs. Cameron looked up as Harry entered.

"Oh, hello there!" Walter Cameron called out cheerily. He got up from his chair and strode towards Harry. "You're the bloke who came to visit a few weeks back, but blimey! I can't remember your name!"

Harry smiled slightly; at least he remembered Harry had visited.

"It's Harry, sir," he replied. "Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter," Walter said, as though hearing the name for the first time. "Well, very nice to see you!"

Theresa Cameron made her way over to them. Her face, however, did not shine with recognition upon seeing Harry.

Harry anxiously looked around for Healer Waltham, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Um, hello again, Mrs. Cameron," Harry said to her a bit awkwardly. "It's a pleasure to see you."

"Who are you?" the woman demanded.

"I'm..."

"Terry, his name is Harry Potter," Walter said consolingly to his wife. "He visited us a week ago. Don't you remember?"

The woman clearly did not and continued to eye Harry suspiciously.

"What do you want?" she questioned, coming to stand next to her husband. She looped her arm tightly through his.

"I was actually looking for your son, Duncan. I had—"

But, apparently this was the wrong thing to say.

At the mention of the boy's name, Mrs. Cameron began shaking her head wildly. She threw Mr. Cameron away from her and backed away from Harry as quickly as she could, as though terrified by the sight of him.

"Who are you?" the woman shrieked, digging her hands into her hair. "What do you want from us? Get away! Just leave us be!"

"Darling!" Mr. Cameron cried, recovering his balance after his wife's untimely shove. "He's just looking for Duncan. There's no need—"

His words were drowned out. Mrs. Cameron began screaming at the top of her lungs. The shrill sound echoed high off the ceiling.

A moment later, two men in bottle green robes charged through the curtains. Harry recognized one of them as Healer Waltham. Together with his assistant, the Healer grabbed a hold of Mrs. Cameron and dragged her to the bed.

Harry watched as Healer Waltham unfurled his wand. The woman began to scream even louder.

"Stupefy!" the Healer shouted.

Theresa fell onto the bed with a dull thunk. Her eyes closed and she was silent.

The other Healer lifted Mrs. Cameron's legs and laid her out properly on the bed. Healer Waltham, however, rounded on Mr. Cameron.

"Good God, man!" he yelled at the bewildered Muggle. "What happened this time?"

Mr. Cameron pulled his eyes away from his wife. He briefly glanced at Harry. "It was about Duncan," the man said worriedly.

Healer Waltham brought a hand to his face. "How many times have I told you not to mention the boy's name when your wife gets in this state?"

"It wasn't me, doctor," Walter protested. "It was that man there!"

Healer Waltham turned and spotted Harry for the first time.

"Ch-Chief Potter?" the Healer said, blinking in surprise. "Why, what are you doing here, sir?"

Harry, slightly shaken, stepped forward.

"I was merely...I just wanted to speak with the boy, Duncan," Harry explained. "I mentioned him to Mrs. Cameron and she...well, you saw."

The Healer looked at him strangely. "Duncan? What do you need him for?"

"Well," Harry began. Both of the Healers and Mr. Cameron were staring at him. Harry sighed. "There's going to be a small gathering at...my house today. I was wondering if Duncan would care to accompany me there, just so he could get some fresh air and play with some children near his own age. I came to ask whether he could leave the hospital for the rest of the day," Harry finished.

"I'm sorry," the Healer said, still not understanding. "You want Duncan to come to your house?"

"Yes," Harry said, "if he's in any condition to side-along apparate with me, that is."

"Side-along apparate? To your house?" the Healer repeated.

"Yes," Harry said again, disliking the sheer disbelief etched into the Healer's face.

"Well, that sounds like a lovely idea," Mr. Cameron spoke up. "I'm sure Duncan would enjoy being outdoors again. He's been cooped up in the ward for nearly three weeks now. It's not healthy for a child."

Healer Waltham still looked exceedingly confused.

"It would just be for the rest of the day," Harry explained to the Healer.

"Well," Healer Waltham finally said, scratching his head absently, "that sounds fine. Duncan is only taking a Memory Potion these days. He's already had it today. We sent him to the children's ward when we determined his mother was having an...off day."

By this, Harry understood that Theresa Cameron did not recognize her son.

"Right. So, I have your permission to take Duncan with me?"

"Er, yes, I suppose," the Healer said, still looking like he couldn't comprehend why Harry would be interested in the Muggle boy. "As long as he's back by ten the next morning for his potion, there should be no problem.

"Excellent," Harry said smiling. He turned to Duncan's father. "And do I have your permission, sir?"

The man looked surprised Harry had asked his opinion on the matter.

"Oh, well," Walter Cameron stammered, "that's very generous of you, sir. Can I ask where you'll be taking Duncan?"

"There's going to be a small party for my friend's birthday today, at her house. My daughter and her son will be there, and I know they would love to meet Duncan," Harry said warmly.

Mr. Cameron smiled as well. "Oh, that sounds very nice indeed. What's your friend's name?"

"Oh, it's Hermione Granger. You know her, of course!"

"Hermione!" the Muggle exclaimed. "Oh, yes of course Duncan can go! He's very fond of her. She's mentioned her son as well. I believe he's about the same age as Duncan?"

"About two years younger, actually, as is my daughter," said Harry.

"Splendid!" Walter cried, genuine happiness in his eyes. "Well, by all means, please do take Duncan for the day. It's much better than roaming the halls of the hospital, to be sure."

Harry smiled, understanding. He glanced at Healer Waltham, whose expression had soured as Harry and Mr. Cameron spoke. Harry realized too late that the Healer might have expected to be invited to Hermione's birthday as well, considering he was the Head Healer on her case after the attack.

"Great," Harry said, turning to Waltham. "Well, I'll just collect Duncan now, if that's all right with you?"

"Oh, yes, of course," the Healer replied. "Please follow me."

Harry smiled at Mr. Cameron before he passed through the curtains.

Mrs. Cameron was still lying on her bed, her chest rising and falling as though in slumber.

Harry followed Healer Waltham out of the ward and down several more hallways until they stopped before another set of double doors. Harry could hear the high peal of children's laughter.

"This is the children's ward, Chief Potter," the Healer said somewhat curtly. "Duncan will be inside if he hasn't run off somewhere. If that's the case, just ask any of the Healers to help you track him down. I'm afraid I have to attend to another patient. Good day."

"Good day," Harry replied.

The Healer disappeared around the corner and Harry entered the ward.

The large room behind the doors was filled with artificial sunlight. About twenty wizarding children were frolicking about inside. They were playing with all manner of interesting-looking toys.

Harry noticed that some of the children were performing underage magic, as none of them were of age to own a wand. But, since they were under the watchful supervision of two forbidding-looking female Healers, Harry realized this did not present a problem.

Harry cast his eyes about the room. He immediately spotted Duncan sitting in a far corner by a window.

Unlike the other children, Duncan was not playing at all. In fact, it appeared Duncan was trying to make himself as small as possible. His legs were tucked up against himself and a large book was balanced on his knees. His face was only a few inches above the parchment.

Harry made his way towards the boy, casting a reassuring glance at the Healers.

"Hello, Duncan," Harry greeted.

Duncan's head snapped up. He immediately recognized Harry.

"Oh, hello!" the boy said, shocked. "Mr.-Mr. Potter?"

"Yes," Harry said, squatting down so that he was eye-level with boy. "How are you doing, Duncan?"

The boy closed the book (by the looks of it, another pilfered tome from the medical library) and grinned wildly at Harry. "Oh, I'm fine!" he cried. "What are you doing here, sir? Did Hermione come too?"

Duncan was craning his neck, clearly expecting to see Hermione just behind Harry.

Harry laughed.

"No, she's not here," Harry explained quickly. "But, if you like, you can come see her right now."

"Really!"

"Yes," Harry said. "You see, today is Hermione's birthday and she and I wanted to invite you to her party."

"A party?" the boy repeated as though he could hardly believe his ears.

"Yes, it will be at Hermione's house and her son and my daughter will be there. They are both about your age."

"Oh," Duncan said, his smile dropping slightly. "Are your...are your children magical children?"

Harry recognized the boy's concern. He watched as Duncan surreptitiously glanced at the children performing magic over Harry's shoulder.

"Yes, they're magical. But, you don't need to worry, Duncan. They are both very friendly and are used to playing with...children like you," Harry said, refraining from using the word "Muggle," remembering how it had so offended the boy. "Whether you're magical or not, that doesn't matter to them."

Duncan looked at his feet, trying to determine whether he could believe Harry.

"I don't know," Duncan whispered, refusing to meet Harry's eyes.

Harry's brow furrowed. What sort of experience had the boy had in the children's ward that he was so hesitant now?

Harry decided to try a different tack.

"We're going to be cooking a big dinner and I know Hermione would love to see you. She also has a huge backyard at her house, where you can run around...get some fresh air..."

Duncan still did not look up.

"And maybe, maybe if you're really lucky," Harry said, smiling, "Hermione will show you her magical book collection."

That seemed to do the trick.

Duncan looked up, his eyes wide. After a moment, he said, "Oh. All right...that sounds fine."

Harry smiled.

"I'll have to ask my dad though," the boy said anxiously.

"Don't worry," Harry said, standing up. "I've already asked and you have his permission."

Duncan smiled again at Harry, standing up as well.

"Are you ready to go now?" Harry asked.

"Yes," the boy said empathically, looking as though he could not stand another second in the ward. "How will we get there?"

"Well, Duncan," Harry said as the two moved towards the exit, "maybe you can experience your first bit of magic right now."

Harry and Duncan landed on the doorstep of Ron and Hermione's home.

Duncan's grip on Harry's arm, which had been so tight before they apparated, slackened and the boy tilted to the side. Harry caught him about the shoulders and righted him.

"Yeah, it's kind of uncomfortable," Harry apologized.

Duncan looked around, shaken. He seemed to be in shock that they were standing in a completely different location. Slowly, he looked up at Harry.

"No. That was amazing," the boy said in awe. "How did we do that?"

"It's called Apparation. Basically, it's like teleportation where you picture a location in your head and apparate there. When you grabbed my arm, I took you along for the ride," he explained.

The boy nodded, though it was obvious he did not understand. He turned to look at the front door.

"This is Hermione's house?" Duncan asked cautiously.

"Yup," Harry replied.

"Does-she know I'm coming?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, she knows. She's looking forward to seeing you."

The boy's cheeks turned a dark shade of pink and he took a deep breath.

Harry knocked loudly on the door.

No answer came so he twisted the doorknob. Unfortunately, it gave way. Harry frowned, thinking he would have to suppress the urge to chastise Hermione about this.

Harry ushered Duncan inside and they both looked around.

The foyer had obviously just been cleaned. A lovely flower arrangement sat on the center table and the cloakroom on the right had been reorganized. Music was coming from the kitchen located in the back of the house. It sounded like jazz.

Harry urged the boy forward again and together they made their way towards the kitchen.

Inside, Ron was standing at the counter reading the instructions on a box of instant gravy. He looked up at the sound of Harry and Duncan's footsteps.

"Harry!" Ron called out, smiling. "I was wondering when you'd get here, mate. God knows I need your help."

He spotted Duncan. "Oh. Who's this?"

Harry stepped forward, taking the hesitant boy with him.

"This is Duncan Cameron," Harry explained. "He's the son of...the Muggles Hermione has been helping. We thought it'd be nice if Duncan could come for the party. Get out of the hospital for a day, you know."

Ron's eyebrows had drawn together when Harry whispered the word "Muggles," but he seemed to understand. Ron bent his tall frame so that he could look the boy in the face.

"Nice to meet you, Duncan," Ron said, holding out a hand.

Duncan took it and mumbled, "Nice to meet you."

"This is Hermione's husband," Harry said to the boy, at which point Duncan's face seemed to fall somewhat. He gave Ron a rather appraising look, which seemed to amuse the older man.

"Well, not today, actually!" Ron laughed, standing straight again.

The boy looked confused.

"I hadn't explained that part yet, Ron," Harry said quickly.

Ron shrugged. "Might as well explain it now," he said and without warning, Ron picked Duncan up under the arms and sat him on top of the kitchen table.

The boy looked startled, but he was not afraid.

"Duncan," Ron said. "You know it's Hermione's birthday today?"

The boy nodded quickly.

"Good. We're going to be playing a little game just for her today. See, today I am not going to be Hermione's husband. Harry is."

Duncan looked bewildered at this. Though he was young, he knew Ron's statement was not exactly normal.

"Why?" the boy asked.

Ron laughed again, glancing back at Harry. "It's a complicated story. But basically, Harry screwed up so he and Hermione have to pretend to be married tonight. It's his punishment," Ron joked. "No, actually, we're having guests over who have to believe Harry and Hermione are married, understand?"

"No," Duncan replied.

Ron smiled. "Well, you don't have to," he said, patting the boy's brown hair. "But do you think you can remember that Harry and Hermione are pretending today? You won't give the game away, will you?"

The boy shook his head, looking between the two men.

"Okay," Ron said satisfied, turning back towards the kitchen.

"Where is Hermione?" Harry asked.

"She's upstairs doing some last minute cleaning," Ron explained, stopping before the stove. "I don't even know why she bothers. Not like anyone important is going up there."

"No one important?" Hermione's voice said from the hallway. A second later, she emerged.

Harry noticed that she had changed out of her work clothes. She was wearing a familiar pair of jeans with a thin white T-shirt tucked in at the waist. She immediately spotted Duncan on the table.

"Duncan!" she cried. She came forward and swept the boy into her arms. Duncan turned crimson.

"M-miss Hermione," he said, awkwardly returning the hug. "Er, hi."

Hermione leaned back slightly, the boy still in her arms. "I'm so glad you could come for my birthday, Duncan. My son and Harry's daughter will be here in a little while and they would just love to meet you."

The boy smiled nervously.

"Oh, and how could I forget? Tonight, we're having one more boy over. He's your age and he's just like you," Hermione said, placing extra emphasis on the last word.

Duncan seemed to understand that this meant the other boy was a Muggle. His face relaxed slightly.

"Where are the kids?" Harry asked.

"School lets out in thirty minutes or so," Hermione said, turning to him. "I'm having Norma apparate them here."

There was a loud clattering noise and Harry, Hermione, and Duncan turned to face the kitchen. Several pots had just fallen out of a cabinet, one nearly missing Ron's head.

Ron turned around somewhat sheepishly. "Sorry."

Hermione sighed. "Harry, would you help him? We were supposed to be farther along already but we haven't even started the roast."

"Sure," Harry replied. He looked back at Duncan, who was watching Hermione out of the corner of his eye. Harry came up to Hermione and whispered in her ear.

"Maybe you could show Duncan the library while we wait for the kids?" Harry suggested, his voice low. "He really wants to see it."

Hermione nodded quickly and turned to Duncan. "How would you like a tour of the house?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically and slid off the table, following Hermione out of the room.

Harry and Ron were left alone.

"So that's the boy Callahan attacked, huh?" Ron asked, picking up the fallen cookware.

"Yeah," Harry said grimly. "He's a nice kid. St. Mungo's seems pretty rough on him, though. His sister is still out cold and his mum doesn't always remember who he is..."

"Shit."

"Plus, I don't think the other kids are very friendly towards him..."

"Yeah," Ron said slowly, considering this. "I guess that would make sense. I know I was terrified of Muggles when I was younger. You hear a lot of stories about them as a kid. Only after I married Hermione was I okay with them...it's still awkward though, I s'pose."

Harry nodded, turning on the tap and washing his hands. He had just reached for a hand towel when Ron spoke again.

"So, are you and Hermione ready to play house?" he asked jokingly.

Harry laughed awkwardly. "Yeah, I guess so."

Focusing on Duncan had helped Harry forget he would be pretending to be Hermione's husband. At Ron's words, the same peculiar feeling of dread and excitement rushed through him.

Harry glanced at Ron.

"I, um, I wanted to thank you for dealing with my...stupidity, Ron. I really fucked up at the hospital, I know..." Harry said, leaning back against the counter.

Ron was shaking his head. "No, it's fine." He transferred another pot to the sink. "If I had been in your position, I would have said some crazy shit to that doctor too. Though, I don't think I would have said I was married to Ginny..."

Harry laughed.

"But, Harry," Ron said, looking seriously at him. "I, well... You saved Hermione's life, you know? You brought her to St. Mungo's and saved her life. I don't care what lie you had to tell as long as it saved her. So...really, you can do no wrong by me, mate."

Harry looked at his feet, a new feeling, guilt, constricting his chest. Ron's words were exactly what Harry needed to hear, and he was relieved to hear them...yet, Harry could not help feeling that Ron was being too gracious about this. That he, Harry, did not deserve such praise.

"I...it was the doctor who saved her life," Harry said quietly.

"Maybe," Ron replied, turning back to the sink. "I meant what I said, though."

Harry nodded behind Ron's head.

"Hey, and you know," Ron said turning around and grinning. "Maybe you'll finally see what I put up with being married to her. It's not easy being Hermione Granger's husband."

Harry chuckled. "I'm sure."

"Do you think you're going to be able to pull it off?" Ron asked.

"What?"

"Well, you know, the act of being married to her?"

"Oh," Harry said puzzled. He had not thought about it. "I figured we would just act like our normal selves, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose," Ron replied, picking up the hand towel Harry had left on the counter. "If worst comes to worst, you have my permission to hold her hand or something."

Harry felt his pulse quicken. "Um right, well thanks..."

"Sure," Ron said, smirking. "As long as there's no snogging, I think we'll be fine."

Harry laughed as un-awkwardly as possible. "Right."

Harry turned towards the pantry. "So, what are we making anyway?"

Ron and Harry prepped the ingredients for a lovely three-course meal.

Harry handled the lamb roast, unwrapping the large leg of meat and trimming off the excess fat. He waved his wand at a drawer and directed a knife to begin cutting the fresh spices Hermione had picked from the conservatory. Harry basted the lamb with a light red wine sauce and sprinkled garlic, rosemary, and a bit of thyme along the top.

Ron prepared the vegetables. There would be asparagus, mashed potatoes, and artichoke hearts. First, however, Ron worked on the salad, rinsing the lettuce with his wand and slicing several cucumbers and tomatoes.

Ron had the radio on by the kitchen window. It was now playing a song that sounded vaguely familiar to Harry.

"Hey, I remember this song," Harry said smiling as he stirred the gravy for the potatoes. They had ditched the instant stuff in favor of making the gravy from flour and the animal fat from the roast. "Wasn't it...?"

"Yeah, it was big right when I started at the shop. You were still in training, I think."

It had a jazzy, Motown feel. Harry reached over and turned up the volume. "Yeah, that sounds right..."

Ron, who had been walking towards the pantry, began shaking his hips to the beat.

"Oh, God. Please don't," Harry pleaded, catching sight of Ron.

Ron continued, however, and began using a dishtowel as a sort of shimmy. Harry laughed at the exhibition. Then, he sighed.

Harry began moving his hips too, stirring the gravy as he swayed. The song reached the chorus and Ron slid around the kitchen island, picking up a spatula to use as makeshift microphone.

"Your love left me choked up, when we broke up. When you left me for that other, that other bloke. Oh, why? Oh, why?" Ron sang in time with the lyrics.

Harry laughed, wincing. Ron had never been the best singer.

Harry lowered the heat on the stove and joined Ron. Harry began swaying stiffly, as that was about all the dancing he had ever been able to accomplish.

The song reached the chorus again.

Harry was spinning in a small circle when he heard a strange sound behind him.

Harry and Ron spun around. Hermione and Duncan were standing in the doorway. Harry realized that the strange sound had actually been Duncan's laughter, which he had never heard before.

Hermione was smiling at them, her arms crossed in front of her.

Harry quickly returned to the sink, embarrassed. Ron stopped dancing as well. He reached for the radio and turned the volume down just as the song was finishing.

"Well, well," Hermione said, moving forward. "I leave you two alone, and this is what I find? I thought you were supposed to be cooking my dinner?"

"God, we were," Ron said with mock exasperation. "The lamb is in the oven. The salad's nearly done and we'll start the vegetables in a bit."

Hermione smirked.

Harry, his cheeks slightly red, looked past Hermione. Duncan was wearing a wide grin and was carrying five books in his skinny arms, books obviously on loan from Hermione.

"Did you like the library, Duncan?" Harry called out, trying to direct the conversation away from his dancing.

The boy nodded excitedly. He seemed much more at ease now, likely due to Hermione's presence.

Just then, the kitchen occupants heard the front door slam. Another voice came from the hallway.

"Mum!" Harry heard Hugo shout. "Mum, we're home!"

Hermione turned and walked quickly into the hallway. Ron was stirring the gravy, so Harry decided to follow Hermione. He motioned Duncan to his side.

In the foyer, Hugo and Lily were standing with an elderly witch with springy tufts of grey hair. The witch's name was Norma Krouse. She was one of the teachers at Lily and Hugo's wizarding preparatory school.

"Hello, Hermione," the woman rasped, releasing her hold of the children's hands. "How are you, my dear?"

"Oh, fine thank you," Hermione said, bringing Hugo to her. She quickly embraced her son. "Thanks so much for apparating the children today. I've had my hands full here."

Norma nodded, her beady eyes taking in the studiously clean house. "It's no problem. I'm always happy to help," she replied. Then, she caught sight of Harry.

"Oh, Chief Potter!" she exclaimed, her cheeks coloring slightly. "You're here as well? So pleasant to see you, dear boy."

Harry nodded to her. Norma Krouse was one of those teachers Harry avoided at Lily's school. She was not an unpleasant woman; she just seemed overly enraptured with Harry. Most of the teachers at least attempted to put on an air of nonchalance in Harry's presence. Mrs. Krouse did not.

"How are you, my boy?" the woman asked, coming up and taking a hold of Harry's hand in her own gnarled fingers. "I've been hearing the most wonderful rumors about you these days."

"Rumors?" Harry repeated, laughing. "I can assure you they're all lies."

"Oh, heavens no!" Mrs. Krouse protested. "I hear you're up for a big promotion?"

Harry shook his head. "I can assure you, Mrs. Krouse, I'm not. There's really nowhere else for me to go in the Auror Department, seeing as I'm already Head..."

"Oh, dear!" the woman interrupted. "I didn't mean the Auror Department! I heard you might be considering the top job, if you know what I mean?"

Harry wanted to roll his eyes. Every few years, rumors started up that Harry was going to run for Minister of Magic.

"No, no, Mrs. Krouse," Harry said evenly. "If I was, you'd be the first to know."

Mrs. Krouse smiled at that.

Hermione, who had been watching the exchange with growing amusement, now came to Harry's rescue.

"Well, thank you so much, Mrs. Krouse. Don't know what I would do without you," she said, gently directing the woman towards the door.

Mrs. Krouse disappeared a moment later and Hermione shut the front door, shaking her head. She caught sight of Duncan, who was hiding behind Harry as best as he could.

Hugo and Lily were kicking off their shoes in the cloakroom.

"Kids," Hermione called, coming towards Harry and Duncan. "I want to introduce you to someone."

Hugo and Lily looked up curiously and spotted Duncan for the first time. Harry placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and directed him forward. Duncan looked exceptionally nervous again as he faced Harry and Hermione's children.

Hermione smiled. "Lily, Hugo—this is Duncan. He's been helping me with one of my big cases so I've invited him for my birthday. He's going to be staying for the party. You guys want to introduce yourselves?"

Lily stepped forward first. "Hi, I'm Lily," she said, confidently extending her hand.

Harry could tell Hermione might have some competition for Duncan's heart.

"Hi," the boy said shyly. "I'm Duncan."

Not wanting to be left out, Hugo extended his own arm. "I'm Hugo! Are you a Muggle? Mum said we were going to have Muggles over today."

Duncan's smile faded slightly. Hugo didn't know the word made Duncan uncomfortable. Harry stepped in.

"Yes, he is, Hugo," Harry said. "But he's a very special friend of the family now, so we're going to make him feel welcome, right?"

Hugo nodded, always pleased when he caught his Uncle Harry's attention. "Yessir," the boy said. He turned back to Duncan. "I love Muggles. I think they are pretty funny. My cousin Albus loves Muggles too, or at least the books they read. And I figure if Albus likes them, I like them too. He's very smart."

Hermione laughed lightly, amused by Hugo's earnestness. "Why don't you three go up to Hugo's room? We'll call you when supper is ready."

Hugo took a hold of Duncan's arm with two hands. "You'll like my room. It has a view of the backyard!"

The three children charged up the stairs.

Hermione sighed, smiling at Harry. "Well, that seemed to go well."

"Yeah. I like the way Hugo looks at things," he chuckled.

Hermione laughed lightly. "Well, I think you should keep an eye on Lily. Duncan is very cute and he seems a bit smitten with her already."

Harry smirked. "Yeah, but smitten with you as well, love. You've probably just crushed his boyhood heart."

"Good Lord!" she exclaimed with faux-exasperation. "Isn't it enough that I have two husbands today? There's only so much a girl can handle!"

Harry smiled, feeling his face grow hot again.

Harry and Hermione moved back into the kitchen. Ron was directing several large potatoes into a kettle of boiling water.

Harry moved back to the sink and Hermione leaned against the counter. The radio was playing a song Harry did not recognize.

"You know, I was thinking upstairs..." Hermione said slowly.

"What else is new?" Ron asked, chuckling.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I was thinking that the Srinivasans are of Indian descent, right?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you think they're vegetarians?"

"What now?" Ron asked, confused.

"Aren't some Indians vegetarian?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry replied. "I don't know if the Srinivasans are though."

"Wait, what? What is this veggie-tarian thing? Is it like a horoscope?" Ron asked, placing a lid over the potatoes.

Hermione rolled her eyes again. "It means they don't eat meat, Ronald."

"What?" Ron exclaimed, as though he had never heard of such a thing. "Why would they do that?"

"It's a religious thing, I think," Harry said, leaning against the counter.

"It doesn't matter why," Hermione said, "but I think we should make some sort of vegetarian option for them, just in case."

"What?" Ron said again. "We already have vegetables."

"Yeah, but like a main course," Hermione explained. "We could make pasta or maybe eggplant parmesan or something?"

Harry shrugged, agreeing with her.

Ron, however, said, "C'mon Hermione! This dinner is already huge. Now we've got to make one more thing?"

"I just want them to be as comfortable as possible," Hermione said, defensive. "They shouldn't have to eat less just because we didn't have a vegetarian option. If it bothers you so much, I'll make it."

Ron looked at her and then shrugged. "Do what you want. I'll stick to the carnivore fare, thank you very much."

Hermione frowned slightly. "Fine then," she said coming towards the sink to wash her hands.

An awkward silence passed between the couple. Harry's brow furrowed.

Quietly, he came to Hermione's side. "Do you want help?"

Hermione looked up, giving him a small smile. "Sure, could you grab the eggplant? It's in the icebox."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione continued to cook in silence, listening to the radio. The roast was filling the entire kitchen with a warm, rich aroma.

"When is Ginny coming?" Hermione asked, carefully slicing the eggplant.

"She said she'd be at the Prophet until at least six," Harry responded, looking through the wine rack in the pantry.

"Oh, okay."

"When is Daniel coming?" Harry asked in return.

"Around the same time, I think." Hermione laughed. "He seems very excited about this. He says one of his favorite things is watching wizards act like Muggles."

Harry and Ron laughed.

"Well, we can't make it too easy for him, can we?" Ron said, removing the skins of the potatoes with a fork.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Let's just say, I've been thinking about my alternate personality," Ron replied cryptically.

Hermione turned to face him, suspicious. "Please, Ronald. Just act like you're normal. Please?"

Ron shrugged, giving nothing away. "I think we should make this dinner worth Daniel's time, is all."

Hermione groaned, exasperated. "If you mess up this dinner, Ronald Weasley, I swear I will not forgive you."

"Don't be so uptight," Ron said, wiping his hands. "I'm not going irreparably harm the precious Srinivasans."

"That's right you won't!" Hermione called as Ron strode out of the kitchen to use the loo.

Harry barely looked up during their conversation. He was so used to hearing Ron and Hermione argue that he could usually tune out their fights these days.

Hermione sighed. She glanced at Harry, and then looked around the room.

"Well, if all else fails, at least we have good food," she said, smiling. "We just need to steam the asparagus and mash the potatoes. Did you check the temperature on the roast?"

Harry nodded.

Just then, the sound of three sets of feet running down the stairs reached their ears. Hugo, Lily, and Duncan spilled into the kitchen, laughing wildly.

"Mum! Mummy!" Hugo shouted, crashing into his mother. "Can Duncan, Lily, and I go flying? Duncan wants to ride one of the brooms. He's never been, 'cause you know, he's a Muggle!"

The children laughed uproariously, including Duncan.

Hermione looked up at Harry. He immediately registered her concern. Could Muggles even fly broomsticks?

"Oh, Hugo," Harry said quickly, "I don't know if that's such a good idea. It's getting late and you need to change clothes before the party."

Hugo looked defeated, but then Lily came up to her father.

"Please, daddy!" she cried, looking up at him with her characteristic wide-eyed stare. "What if we promise to be super, awesomely safe? It'll only be for a little while."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance. Hermione shrugged. "If you watch them, Harry, I have no problem."

"All right," Harry said, unsure. "Go put on your padding, and I mean all of it. I'll go get your brooms."

Hugo led the way out to the backyard, the children's laughter trailing down the hallway.

"Harry," Hermione said, worried.

"I know," he replied.

Harry watched as Hugo and Lily helped Duncan with his padding.

Harry was standing in the middle of the large lawn in Hermione and Ron's backyard. It was not as big as Harry and Ginny's, but it was still incredibly spacious. There was also a small Quidditch field, though the six tall hoops had been removed for the party.

Harry had located three broomsticks in the shed. He picked out a particularly steady one for Duncan. The three children came towards him and Harry directed Duncan towards his broom. He looked at it doubtfully.

"These things really fly?" he asked.

"Yes," Lily said brightly. "And it's the most wonderful feeling in the world!"

Harry smiled slightly. Lily was proving she was his daughter.

"Lily," Harry said, "why don't you show Duncan how to mount the broom? It's really very simple," he said to Duncan.

The boy nodded, reassured, but Harry felt himself beginning to doubt the situation. Seeing moving pictures was one thing, but Muggles flying brooms? Had it ever been attempted?

Lily moved to the side of her broom and raised her hand. "Up!" she commanded.

The broom shot into her hand and she gracefully seated herself.

"Wow," Duncan breathed, exhilarated.

"Hugo," Harry directed, "you show him now."

Hugo did the same and soon both children were hovering a few feet off the ground watching Duncan.

Duncan smiled and extended a hand over his broom. "Up!" he shouted.

The broom did not move.

The boy's face immediately fell. He looked up at Harry, worried.

"Um," Harry said quickly. "You have to say it very forcefully, Duncan. You have to really believe it's going to work."

Duncan nodded. He took a quick breath.

"UP!" he cried again, staring intently at the broomstick.

Nothing happened.

"Why isn't it working?" Hugo asked, confused.

Harry moved to Duncan's side and raised his own hand over the broom.

"Up!" Harry commanded.

The broom immediately shot into his hand, vibrating beneath his touch. Harry deactivated the broom and laid it back on the ground.

"Try one more time," he said to Duncan.

Duncan positioned himself once more, his face tight.

"Up!" the boy cried, his weakest attempt yet.

Still, the broom did not move.

Duncan blushed, looking anywhere but at the three wizards.

Harry cast about for a way to correct the situation. It had been a bad idea to suggest flying...

Thinking quickly, Harry placed his hand over the broom. "Up!" he shouted.

The broom rocketed into his hand again and Harry steadied it about three feet off the ground. "Come here, Duncan," Harry said. "I'll lower you on top."

Duncan came towards him. Harry lifted him under the armpits and placed him onto the seat of the broom.

Already, Harry could tell it would not work. The moment Duncan touched the broom, it began to descend, falling to the ground with a light plop.

Duncan looked down, shamefaced. Harry, glancing back at the house, saw Hermione watching them from the porch.

"What's wrong with the broom, daddy?" Lily asked pointedly. She had the good sense not to blame it on Duncan.

Harry, however, stared at his daughter, coming to a decision.

"Lily, honey," Harry said, "fly a little lower. Maybe you can share the broom with Duncan..."

Lily descended several feet so that she was eye-level with her father.

Now, Duncan looked extremely anxious, perhaps because he couldn't stand to have the broom fail while Lily was on it.

"Uh, I don't know," said Duncan, backing away. "I-I don't think it'll work for me."

Harry took the boy by the shoulders.

"Don't worry, son. It'll work," Harry said, infusing his voice with a confidence he did not necessarily possess.

The boy looked anxiously between Harry and Lily, but he nodded.

Lily scooted forward on her seat, holding the broom handle tightly in her hands. Again, Harry lifted Duncan and positioned him carefully behind Lily.

This time, the broom did not fall; the two children stayed hovering where they were. Harry smiled.

"Well, there you go!" Harry said happily. "Duncan, you need to hold tight to Lily. Brooms can be tricky things..."

Duncan didn't need to be asked twice. He quickly wrapped his arms around Lily's waist and gently laid his head on her shoulder. He seemed perfectly content.

Harry frowned slightly. Oh, should have thought of that.

Harry turned around, looking for Hugo. The boy was already darting towards the field. A moment later, Lily and Duncan followed after him.

Harry sighed, smiling slightly. He walked backwards towards the house, watching as Hugo passed the Quaffle to Lily. Harry climbed the porch steps to join Hermione.

Hermione sighed. "Thank goodness you figured something out, Harry. Poor Duncan. His face when his broom didn't work..."

"He seems happy now," Harry smirked. Duncan was still holding Lily tightly about the middle, though he did not look afraid. Both of the children were laughing ecstatically.

Harry and Hermione heard footsteps behind them.

"Well, what do you know?" Ron said, crossing his arms over his chest. "The Muggle is flying."

"Yes," Hermione replied, a little sadly. "With some help from, Lily."

The trio watched the children for a moment. They were shouting as they passed the Quaffle to one another. Then, Ron spoke.

"Hey, what are we going to do about the kids?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Harry questioned.

"Well, you and Hermione are going to be married, right? Are you still going to say Hugo and Lily are your kids? That could probably work for Hugo, but not Lily. Neither of you have red hair."

Harry's eyes widened at this realization. Why hadn't he thought of it before? What were they going to do about the children?

"Oh, God," Hermione said, similarly alarmed. "How could we be that dense?"

She stared at Harry, thinking quickly. "I guess...I guess we could tell the Srinivasans that Hugo is our son, right Harry? Ron, are you going to pretend to be Lily's father?"

"Uh, I can," said Ron. "But wouldn't it make more sense for Ginny to just keep being Lily's mother?"

"Oh yes, of course," Hermione said, rubbing her temple. "I think they'll buy that. Hugo looks more like me than you, Ron. Does that sound okay, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "That should work," he said slowly. "We'll need to explain that to the children..."

"Right," Hermione said. "Though, hopefully the children will be so caught up with each other they won't care what we're saying about them at dinner."

Just then, another explosion of laughter came to the field.

Harry smiled. "I think we can bank on that."

"Okay," Ron said, "so Hugo is yours and Hermione's and Lily is still Ginny's daughter?"

"Yes," Hermione replied.

Ron nodded and the three of them turned back towards the field.

Hermione laughed lightly. "We almost ruined the entire plan there. Thanks, Ron," she said, taking his arm.

Harry caught the way Ron smiled at her. Harry's stomach seemed to tighten slightly. He must be hungry.

"Well, it's nearly six," Hermione said. "I should go get dressed. If Daniel arrives while I'm gone, just entertain him, okay? You should probably send the children in so they can get dressed too. Do you two mind explaining the situation to them?"

"Not a problem," Ron said. Harry nodded.

Hermione turned and moved into the house, running a hand along her hair as she went.

Harry and Ron were silent for a moment.

"Got to hand it to Duncan," Ron said, looking out onto the lawn. "He's managing pretty well up there with Lily."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Ron shifted next to him.

"It's a shame," he said quietly.

"What's a shame?"

"Well, just that the kid seems like he's having such a good time..." Ron said. "But he's not going to be allowed to remember any of this, is he? They'll have to Oblivate him before he leaves St. Mungo's."

Harry nodded.

The thought had occurred to him before, but Harry had decided not to dwell on it. Thinking about it only made all of his interactions with Duncan seem futile. Yet, Harry knew that one day Duncan would have to return to the Muggle world. And when he did, he would know nothing about Harry, Hermione, Ron or their children. No broomsticks and no magical books.

Harry sighed. "I know. It's such a waste."

Ron looked grimly at the field, and then shrugged. "Well, it would be illegal to let him go on remembering. We might as well just make him as happy as possible while we can..."

"Right," Harry said quietly. "You done with the food? Need my help?"

"Nah, mate," Ron said, patting Harry on the shoulder. "You can get dressed if you want."

"No, I think I'll call the kids in," Harry replied.

"Okay. Are you going to explain the children-swapping thing? You need me for that?"

"No, I should be all right," Harry said, grinning.

Ron nodded and stepped back inside the house.

After a few more minutes of watching the children play, Harry called them inside. The sun was beginning to set, smearing streaks of pink and orange light across the sky.

After putting away the equipment, the three children came unwillingly to the porch.

"You guys need to get dressed," Harry said to them. "But first I want to talk to you all about something."

Harry sat down on the highest porch step, the children standing in front of him.

"Now, you three know that we're having some...Muggles, some non-magical people, over for dinner, right?"

Lily, Hugo, and Duncan nodded.

"Our guests are special, though, because they don't know anything about wizards or magic. You also know that it's against the law to tell Muggles about the wizarding world, right?"

Lily and Hugo nodded quickly. Phrases like "against the law" always carried much more weight with children. Duncan, however, looked confused.

"There will be absolutely no talk of magic tonight or the grown-ups are going to be very upset, understood?" Harry said, giving them his sternest expression.

The children nodded again.

Harry smiled, satisfied. "Tonight is also important because we are going to be playing some different parts at dinner. Our guests think that your Aunt Hermione and I are married, so both of us will be putting on a little act. None of you should worry about it, okay? Just leave it to the adults..."

The children did not look particularly shocked by this. They had been told two weeks ago that Harry and Hermione would be putting on a show for the Muggle guests.

"But, that means you two, Lily and Hugo, will have to play a role as well. Hugo, you are going to be my and Hermione's son, tonight."

Hugo's eyes widened.

"Really, Uncle Harry?"

Harry laughed awkwardly. "It's only for tonight and you don't need to act any differently. Just don't call me Uncle Harry."

The boy nodded quickly. "Do I call you Dad?"

"If you want."

Lily, however, was tremendously distraught. "If you are Hugo's dad, am I an orphan?" she cried.

"No, no, sweetie," Harry said worriedly. "Your mum is still going to be here..."

"Oh. Right," Lily said, placated.

Harry looked at the two of them. They seemed fine with the changes, but Harry felt distinctly uncomfortable with this plan. It was far too easy for something to go wrong.

Sighing, Harry asked, "Do you guys understand? Any questions?"

Hugo and Lily shook their heads.

"Okay," Harry said smiling. "Now, we're going to have a little quiz! Call out some words that are off-limits tonight."

"Magic!" Lily cried out first.

Harry nodded.

"Wizard!" said Hugo.

Witch! Broomsticks! Quidditch! Quaffle! The Snitch! Spells! Wands! Potions! Hogwarts! Auror! Ministry of Magic! House elf! Hungarian Horntails! Flobberworms!

Hugo and Lily giggled.

"Yes, yes," Harry said, approvingly. "Any others?"

Hugo and Lily were quiet, Duncan looking on anxiously.

"How about 'Muggle?'" Harry suggested.

"Muggle!" cried Hugo.

Harry laughed. "Okay, good job guys. Go inside and get dressed."

Lily and Hugo ran up the stairs but Duncan lingered behind, kicking a tuft of grass with his foot. He seemed troubled.

"Duncan? You don't need to change clothes, you know," Harry explained quickly.

Duncan nodded, still looking down. After a moment, he spoke.

"So," he said slowly, "the people coming tonight are like me, right? They're Muggles?"

"Yes," Harry said uneasily. "I know you don't like that word, and I agree that it's somewhat.... well, in this world it's unfortunately used quite often...I used it just now only because I needed to explain to Hugo and Lily..."

"I understand," Duncan said. "Can I ask a question, though?"

Harry nodded.

"Why can't we tell the people coming tonight about magic, about this world?"

"Well, because it's against the law."

"Why?"

"For a lot of reasons, I guess," said Harry slowly. "There's something here called the Statute of Secrecy. It's a very old law that all the wizards in the world have been following for hundreds of years. You see, back then, wizards thought it was best to conceal their existence..."

"Why?"

"Well, because wizards and witches were being persecuted. Some wizards were caught and killed by Muggles. They burned witches at the stake and hunted down magical children. At the same time, Muggles wanted wizards to perform magic for them, to solve all their problems with our powers.

"But, maybe the worst of it was that Muggles started burning other Muggles who they mistakenly thought were witches. I think all of that convinced the wizards at the time that our two worlds couldn't mix peacefully, that we had to remain separate."

"So, it was the Muggles' fault, then?"

"It was no one's fault," Harry said quickly. "Back then, people were very superstitious of anything that was different or even slightly threatening. That goes both ways. Muggles were afraid of wizards because of their powers. Wizards were afraid of Muggles because of their numbers. You see, wizards have always been a very small

population. Even in Great Britain, Muggles outnumber us by about forty to one."

"Could it be different now? Could Muggles be ready to know about wizards?"

Harry paused. Duncan didn't realize he was talking about the unification of the wizarding and Muggle worlds. In the far, far left of wizarding politics, this notion was called the Reunification Movement. It was popular in Scandinavia, Switzerland, and New Zealand, but had never been implemented since revealing the existence of wizards in one country would consequently reveal their existence in all countries. Harry knew Hermione's sympathized with the movement, but it was such a small and radical cause. Not at all viable in mainstream politics.

"I don't think so," Harry replied, honestly. "A lot of wizards still believe Muggles are very superstitious, and maybe that's true. Some say that if wizards revealed themselves now, it would be even worse than it was four hundred years ago. Muggles now have machine guns and tanks, you know? I think there's still a lot of...distrust."

"But some Muggles know about wizards, right? Lily told me Hermione's friend knows."

"Daniel?" Harry guessed. "Yes, he knows. His mum was born into the magical world but she didn't have any magical powers, so she lived as a Muggle, married a Muggle, and raised Daniel as one."

"But, he doesn't tell anyone about this?" Duncan asked skeptically.

"He might," Harry said frankly. "But, really, who would believe him? His close family members know and that's enough for him."

Duncan seemed to understand this. "I won't tell anyone either. I don't have anyone to tell."

Harry stared at the boy. Duncan knew nothing about wizarding law. He didn't know that in a few weeks, perhaps, this would all be a mangled memory in his mind.

"Do you like it here, Duncan?" asked Harry curiously. "Do you like knowing all this exists?"

Duncan seemed to deeply consider Harry's words.

"I-I don't know," Duncan replied after a moment. "I think it's amazing that real magic exists. It's even more amazing that it's been kept a secret for so long. But, I feel...I feel jealous too. It doesn't seem fair. If that man hadn't attacked my family, I still wouldn't know. But, at the same time, I would be happy to forget about all of this...if, if it meant my family could get well...if we could go back home."

Harry looked at the boy sadly. Seized by an impulse, Harry reached forward and brought the boy to his chest. Duncan stiffened, but he did not pull away.

"They'll get better, son," Harry said quietly. "I know they will. We just have to have faith, right?"

"Right," Duncan replied, his voice muffled.

Harry released the boy. "Why don't you run upstairs and wash up? We'll call you guys down in a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay," Duncan smiled. He ran up the steps, leaving Harry alone on the porch.

Harry placed his elbows on his knees and stared at the Ron and Hermione's backyard. The sun sent long shadows through the trees of the small wooded area at the end of the yard.

Harry distractedly ran a hand through his hair, thinking about what Duncan had said. He felt he could understand the boy. Duncan, much like Harry in his youth, only wanted one thing: his family returned to him.

Harry desperately hoped the boy could have that.

Chapter 10: The Dinner Party

When Harry reentered the house it was just past six. Ron was still in the kitchen, transferring dishes into their respective containers. Harry helped him by casting warming spells on the bottom of each dish.

Together, Ron and Harry brought the platters into the dining room. Ron and Hermione's house actually had two dining rooms: a formal dining room with white oak paneling and a less formal dining space that abutted the conservatory. Hermione had chosen the later.

The second dining room was spectacular in Harry's opinion. One wall was entirely composed of floor-to-ceiling windows, which provided an stunning view of the backyard. The floors were the same, slated wood that ran throughout the rest of the house. There were exposed beams in the ceiling. The true centerpiece of the room, however, was the chandelier. It was an intricately carved pair of enormous antlers. Delicate candles rested atop each point.

With a wave of his wand, Harry lit the candles. Hermione had also strung lights around the edge of the room. Harry lit these too, and a warm glow filled the space. The white tablecloth was laden with delicate china with gold accents.

Harry placed a steaming bowl of asparagus on the table.

"Hermione wanted this done a certain way," Ron said, agitated. "We might want to wait for her before we set anything up. She'll just yell at us."

Harry shrugged.

"Reckon we should get dressed then?" Ron said.

"Sure," Harry said. "Left my stuff in my bag..."

Together, Ron and Harry walked back into the foyer. Ron climbed the stairs while Harry proceeded to the cloakroom to collect his things.

Rummaging through his satchel, Harry pulled out a dark blue button-down shirt and a pair of dark grey slacks. Harry hung up his Auror

cloak and quickly went to change in the guest bathroom. Before he stepped out, Harry looked at his appearance in the mirror.

His hair was graying at the temples and a few wrinkles had begun to appear on his face—mostly laugh lines and those horizontal wrinkles on his forehead. His lightning-bolt scar was still there, unchanged. As Harry examined his appearance, he began to feel slightly queasy.

Was this really going to work? Would they reveal something they shouldn't? Would the children remember their parts? Were they going to have to Oblivate the Srinivasans by the end of the night?

Could...could he pull off being married to Hermione?

Sighing, Harry straightened his shirt and stepped back into the hallway. He returned his bag to the cloakroom just as Ron was coming down the stairs to join him.

"How's Hermione coming along?" Harry asked. He heard the distant sound of a shower running upstairs.

"Well, she hadn't even started getting ready. She was cleaning until I forced her to stop. She's in the shower now."

"Oh, okay," Harry said, digging his hands into his pockets.

Just then, the front door swung open and Ginny appeared.

"Hey guys!" she greeted.

Harry was about to respond, but he stopped. He stared at his wife as she walked towards him. She was gorgeous.

"Wow, Ginny," Ron said, smiling. "What's the occasion? Trying to show us up in front of the Muggles, are you?"

He went forward to embrace his sister.

Ginny was wearing a tight black dress that clung perfectly to her figure. It was low-cut, exposing the porcelain skin of the tops of her breasts. The dress was also quite short, stopping at mid-thigh. Her lips were painted crimson. Harry trailed his eyes downward. She was wearing bright red, four-inch heels.

Releasing her brother, Ginny came towards Harry.

"You look beautiful," Harry told her honestly, kissing her cheek.

"Thanks," Ginny said coolly. "So, how are things shaping up?"

"Fine. Food is cooked. Everything is nearly set. Just waiting for Daniel and the Muggles," Ron answered her.

"Where's Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"She's getting ready," Harry replied.

"And the kids are all ready for tonight?" Ginny asked, moving into the parlor.

Harry and Ron followed her.

"Yeah," Ron said. "There were some last minute changes. Hugo is now Harry and Hermione's kid for tonight."

"Oh," Ginny said, smiling stiffly. "I guess that would make sense. Hugo looks mostly like Hermione anyway. Sorry, Ron."

"No, it's true," Ron chuckled. "He got the Granger genes there, I guess."

Harry watched Ginny's expression. She had come into the house confident and vivacious. But now, there was something off in her smile.

As Harry predicted, Ginny had not reacted well to the news that Harry and Hermione would be playing husband and wife at the dinner party. Following their recent fight about Harry's obsession with Hermione's safety, Ginny's reaction was hardly surprising.

Much like Ron, she had asked why the Muggles couldn't be Obliviated upon their arrival. Harry had explained the various reasons why he and Hermione had no choice but to continue the charade, but this did not make Ginny any happier. Harry, expecting her to yell at him or cry as she had before, was surprised when Ginny had simply shrugged and accepted the plan. Yet, she had

taken on a decidedly chilly attitude towards him since that conversation.

"And Lily?" Ginny was asking now.

"She'll still be your daughter," Ron explained.

"Ah yes," Ginny said, smirking. "My daughter and the daughter of my 'husband away on business.'"

It had been decided that Ginny would be a family friend whose husband was on a business trip, and thus could not attend Hermione's party. Ron would be divorced, though Ron had kept the details of his character intentionally ambiguous.

Ginny had just seated herself in one of the rose-colored armchairs when the doorbell rang. Harry, waving to Ron that he should sit, strode out of the parlor and opened the front door.

Daniel Marin, the former wizarding fellow and Hermione's friend, stood on the doorstep with a bottle of wine in hand.

"Daniel!" Harry said, quickly embracing the man. "Good to see you!"

Daniel was two years younger than Harry and somewhat shorter than him as well. His hair was black and he wore black-rimmed glasses with a red streak running along the side. Currently, he was wearing a handsome burgundy cardigan over a white dress shirt. He looked impeccably put together, as always.

Daniel laughed as Harry released him.

"And there's the man himself!" the architect said. "Hermione's husband."

"Now, hold on," Ron chuckled from behind them. "The Muggles aren't here yet."

"Ron!" Daniel cried out just as excitedly.

Harry stepped to the side so that Daniel could embrace Ron. Ron looked somewhat embarrassed and patted the man on the back. "It's good to see you, mate," Ron laughed.

"Well, I'm happy to be here," Daniel said empathically as he let go of Ron and stepped into the foyer. "The place looks great!"

Then, Daniel spotted Ginny, who had just emerged from the parlor.

"Well, well, Mrs. Potter. Don't you look ravishing?" Daniel said to her.

Ginny giggled. She was fond of Daniel as well. "Stop, Dan. You're looking good yourself."

"Well, thank you," Daniel said, kissing her cheek. "You're the first one to say so. These friends of yours have absolutely no manners."

Harry and Ron laughed.

"How's Michael?" Harry asked, holding his hand out for the bottle of wine.

Daniel passed it to Harry. "Oh, he's fine. He's watching Madeline tonight. He really wanted to come."

Harry nodded. Daniel's husband, Michael, was a graphic designer for a London-based magazine. Together, they had adopted a ten-month-old baby girl, Madeline.

"Want me to get your coat, Dan?" Ron asked.

"Well, thank you, Ronald," Daniel said coquettishly, shrugging out of his coat. He liked making Ron uncomfortable almost as much as Ron liked annoying Daniel.

Ron shook his head, smiling, as he walked towards the cloakroom.

"Why don't we sit down?" Harry suggested. "Hermione's still getting ready and the Muggles won't be here for another thirty minutes."

Harry, Ginny, and Daniel stepped back into the parlor.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Harry asked. "I reckon we can save the wine for dinner?"

"Sure, sure," Daniel said fondly to Harry. "I didn't know what you guys were cooking so I just brought a Merlot. If you have any Campari, I'll take that with a soda water."

Harry nodded. "Gin?"

"No gin, please," Daniel said, pulling a face.

"I was talking to Ginny," Harry chuckled.

Daniel and Ginny laughed.

"I'll just have some white wine, darling," Ginny said, still giggling.

As Harry passed into the hallway, he heard Daniel teasingly say to Ginny: "You're going to have to drop those terms of endearments with him tonight, aren't you? Or else the poor doctor is going to think you're carrying on an affair..."

Harry moved back towards the kitchen. There was a small bar just outside the formal dining room and Harry stopped before it. As he was pouring a liberal amount of soda water into Daniel's glass, he heard footsteps on the stairs above him.

Harry's heart jumped in his chest. His hand shook and the soda water sloshed over the top of the glass.

Mumbling a curse, Harry mopped up the mess and quickly rummaged through the cabinet looking for the bottle of Campari. Harry was shakily pouring Ginny's wine when he heard a number of "oohs" from the parlor.

Heart racing now, Harry strode down the hallway to join the others. As expected, upon stepping into the parlor, he saw Hermione.

She had just released Daniel from a hug and was smiling ecstatically. She turned when she saw Harry.

Harry stared at her for a moment, vaguely aware that his mouth was open. She was wearing a silver cocktail dress with pink undertones woven into the fabric. Unlike Ginny's dress, Hermione's did not cling to her body, but more subtly amplified it. The scooped neckline displayed her bare neck and delicate collarbones. The cinched waist

flowed into a pleated a-line skirt that perfectly accentuated her torso. Best of all, Harry's eyes were drawn to the translucent, floral lace overlay along the hem and neck of the dress. She wore barely any make-up except for a small amount of mascara and a light gloss on her already perfect lips...

She was also barefoot, Harry noted with amusement.

Hermione smiled at him weakly before she turned back to Daniel.

She's nervous too, Harry suddenly realized.

Harry blinked and moved towards the others, feeling light-headed.

"You look gorgeous, darling," Daniel said to her. "Happy birthday."

Hermione smiled shyly. "Thank you. I'm so glad you're here, Daniel. We're going to need a lot of help from you tonight."

Daniel was about to respond, but Ron interjected.

"Hold on, now," the redhead said, grinning mischievously. "We're not going to make it too easy on you, Danny boy."

Daniel raised his eyebrows. "What's your plan?"

"Well, you're our Muggle translator, right? So, I think it's fair to expect you'll have to translate some strange things tonight..."

"Ron," Hermione said warningly.

"No, no. It's all right, Hermione," Daniel said, cocking his head to the side. "You think I can't handle whatever you throw my way, Ron Weasley? Nothing shocks me. Do your worst."

"I will," Ron promised, his voice comically low.

Hermione groaned as the others laughed.

"You two are incorrigible around each other, do you know that?" she said to them. "I swear I start going mental whenever I'm around you both."

Daniel and Ron merely smiled sweetly at each other.

Harry, who had been subtly watching Hermione, moved forward now and handed Daniel his drink and passed Ginny her glass of wine.

"Is everything set?" Hermione asked Ron.

"We haven't arranged the dishes yet, since you said you wanted it done a certain way," Ron replied, rolling his eyes slightly.

"Oh, okay—I'll just go take a look then," Hermione said moving towards the door.

"Do you need any help?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, no. I'll be fine. You stay here and get comfortable," Hermione said, motioning for him to sit down. She turned out of the room.

Harry felt the urge to follow her, but he needed an excuse to leave.

"Do you need a drink, Ron?" Harry asked.

"Nah. Need to keep my wits about me tonight," Ron said with a devilish grin directed at Daniel. The architect merely rolled his eyes.

"All right...well, I'll just go fix myself one then," Harry said, dismissing himself.

No one seemed to notice his departure and Harry released a breath as he reentered the foyer. He thought briefly of going to the bar, but stopped, remembering something.

He moved towards the cloakroom instead.

Harry walked down the darkened hallway towards the dining room. He found Hermione inside carefully arranging a number of dishes and platters in the center of the table. The room was completely lit by candlelight now, the sun having set several minutes ago. Yet, there were so many candles in the room that the space was actually quite well lit. Hermione looked up as Harry approached.

"Harry," she said smiling. The same nervous smile. "Things are nearly set," she said.

"Right," Harry nodded, walking towards the far end of the table. He kept his back to her. "How are we sitting?"

"Well," Hermione paused, putting her hands on her hips as she studied the table, "I suppose we should put all the children at one end so that they can talk. Why don't we put Dr. Srinivasan at the other head of the table, since he is the guest of honor? We'll put his wife on his left and then, you and I can sit on his right," Hermione said, walking towards the two selected chairs. "Daniel can sit next to me here. Then, Ron and Ginny can sit across from us?"

"That sounds fine," Harry replied, his eyes on her, not the table.

Hermione nodded. She glanced at him before she returned her attention to aligning the lamb roast perfectly between the two candelabras.

Harry swallowed.

"Hermione—" he began.

"We'll need some basil..." she whispered.

"What?"

"Basil," Hermione repeated, looking up. "I have some growing in the conservatory. I should pick some, right? It'd be a nice touch for the eggplant parmesan, don't you think?"

"Uh, yeah," Harry agreed.

"Right...well, I'll be right back," she said, striding towards the door.

"I'll come with you," Harry called after her.

Hermione stopped. "Okay," she said, a slight tremble in her voice.

Hermione led the way towards the conservatory at the very back of the house. When Harry stepped inside, he noticed there had been some changes here too. The same web of golden lights that hung in the dining room was also in the conservatory. It gave the room a similarly warm glow. All the magical plants had been removed,

leaving only a few flowering bushes, orchids, and an herb garden along the far wall. It was towards this wall that Hermione strode.

Harry watched as Hermione quickly bent over one of the troughs. She cut a few sprigs of basil with her wand and then turned to face him.

"Well, that's all," she said walking towards the door.

"Wait, Hermione," Harry said. "Come here."

She stopped again and slowly turned to face him. Her eyes were wide.

"What?"

"I wanted...I wanted to give you your birthday present," Harry said, softly.

Hermione stared at him, and then took a hesitant step towards him. As she grew closer, Harry produced the long velvet box he had been concealing behind his back.

"This is for you," he said quietly.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, embarrassed. "You didn't have to. I said no presents for my birthday..."

"I know," Harry said, giving her a half-smile. "But, I've always gotten you a present. Why would this year be any different?"

Hermione eyed the box a warily. "Thank you," she said, not meeting his eyes.

"You haven't seen it yet."

Harry slowly lifted the lid of the box. Hermione gasped.

On blue satin rested a stunning necklace. Dangling from a silver chain, a large square-cut diamond was nestled between two delicate silver wings. The wings of the necklace were not like a bird's wings, but an angel's: high and unfurled, as though thrown back in flight.

The diamond captured the candlelight and threw soft prisms of color across Hermione's amazed face.

"Oh, Harry," she breathed, transfixed. "It's beautiful."

Harry felt his heart race with her reaction. He gently lifted the necklace out of the box.

"If you're going to go on this crusade, you should at least wear armor."

"Armor?" Hermione repeated, confused.

"This necklace represents Nike, the goddess of victory," said Harry softly, releasing the clasp on the necklace. "Wing'd victory."

Hermione froze as Harry moved behind her and lifted her hair. He let the necklace slide across her neck before he quickly closed the clasp. His fingers hovered over the soft skin there before he came around to face her.

"Nike...victory," Hermione said, staring at him. "I don't understand."

"Well, I thought it would be fitting. Especially, considering what's going to happen next year with the Callahan case."

Hermione still looked confused, so Harry smiled and picked up her hands. He led her to the small bench in the center of the room. It was shielded from the door by two large ferns. He removed the herbs from her hands and set them down on the bench.

"Hermione," he said seriously. "I-I know you want to win this case. I know you want it to be historic. And...well, even though I've given you a lot of flack recently, I want that too," Harry said, looking into her eyes. "I want you to win. I want you to win for yourself, but also for the Camerons. They didn't deserve to have Callahan ruin their lives. They may never lead normal lives again—they are victims of a world I can't entirely control, even as the head of the Auror Department."

Hermione stared at him, her fingers warm in his.

"I've been head of the AD for eight years. I know how many magical crimes are committed against Muggles in this country. And every year, the number seems to go up," Harry said, glaring at a spot beyond Hermione's shoulder. "It used to be petty thievery and conschemes. Now, it's assaults and murders...I don't think it's been this bad since Voldemort. And since there is no Voldemort anymore, it's all the more troubling that it's happening."

Harry sighed. "Anyway, I didn't want you to feel like I didn't support you in this case. It's much more than a case to me too. Half of my extended family are Muggles, after all. I want them to be safe from us, just as we worry about being safe from them.... And, well," Harry said, shrugging slightly. "I want you to be the woman that makes that happen. You're the only one for it..."

Harry trailed off and glanced at Hermione. She was gazing at him fondly, a small smile on her lips. She sighed after a long moment, and raised one of her hands. She touched the diamond lightly with her finger.

"So, this is going to protect me, then?" she asked.

Harry shrugged again. "It's my way of protecting you, yes."

"Then I'll wear it for every case," she whispered.

With her response, Harry's heart vibrated with pleasure. It was something he had never felt before. He glanced at her, adoring the way she gently stroked the necklace. When she looked up again, Harry felt that familiar pull in his stomach. His eyes wandered to her lips.

"Harry! Hermione!" Ron's voice called from somewhere down the hallway. "Where are you guys? It's nearly seven!"

Hermione sighed.

She stood up and held a hand out to Harry. "Are you ready, Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley."

He took her hand.

Harry and Hermione joined the others in the foyer. They were all milling around nervously. The Muggles would be arriving any minute.

"What's all this?" Hermione said laughingly. "Who stands around in a foyer waiting for guests to arrive? We're going to scare them away."

"They're just nervous," said Daniel. He was leaning against a wall looking entirely unperturbed.

Harry glanced at Ron and Ginny. Ron was awkwardly pacing around the table in the center of the foyer. Ginny's eyes, however, were locked on Hermione—or more accurately, on Hermione's necklace.

Hermione did not seem to notice Ginny's intense gaze. Instead, she went into the cloakroom. She emerged wearing a pair of short heels that matched her dress perfectly.

Harry smiled. "Should we call the kids?"

"Sure, why not? I'll—" Hermione began.

Before Hermione could finish, Harry had taken out his wand and cast his patronus charm. A large silver stag erupted from the tip and charged up the stairs to notify the children.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

Hermione rounded on Harry. "What the hell are you doing?" she hissed. "You want to give the game away before we even get started?"

"Sorry," Harry said quickly. "It was reflex!"

Daniel and Ron were laughing now.

Harry looked at Ron. The redhead seemed to mouth the words: "Enjoy it, mate."

Hermione took a deep breath and patted her hair. "Everyone. Just act like you're normal."

She nodded to Harry and he went forward to open the door.

Dr. and Mrs. Srinivasan stood on the front step. The doctor was holding a bottle of wine and a young boy of about eleven was standing nervously behind his father.

"Dr. Srinivasan," Harry said warmly. "Please, come inside. So wonderful to see you again."

"Mr. Weasley," the doctor greeted him kindly. "It's a pleasure to see you as well."

The three Muggles stepped into the foyer and took in the small crowd awaiting their arrival.

"Oh, what a lovely home," Dr. Srinivasan said politely. He turned to Harry. "This is my wife, Seema, and our son, Arjun."

"It's a pleasure," Harry said, shaking the woman's hand. She was wearing a beautiful silk sari of deep turquoise embellished with silver thread throughout. Harry also bent down to shake the boy's hand.

Harry guided the Muggles to the center of the room where the rest of the group stood watching them.

Harry looked at Hermione first. He swallowed.

"Please allow me to introduce my wife...Hermione."

Hermione came forward. Harry felt the air leave his lungs with her expression. She was smiling beautifully, but her eyes were brimming with indescribable gratitude as she looked at the Muggle doctor.

"Dr. Srinivasan," Hermione said, taking the doctor's hand. "It's such a pleasure to meet the man who saved my life. We're so, so happy to have you here."

Dr. Srinivasan laughed awkwardly. "Well, Mrs. Weasley—first, please call me Amar, and second, I'm sure your husband has already told you...but, I seem to be suffering from some incomprehensible memory lapse regarding your injury. There's no need to thank the man who can't remember saving you..."

Hermione shook her head, smiling. "There's every reason to thank you. Whether you remember me or not, I'm just glad I was in your care that day."

The doctor blushed under such praise. "Well, perhaps you can enlighten me tonight as to what exactly your injury was, Mrs. Weasley. I'd love to hear about it," he chuckled.

"It's Hermione," she said kindly, "and of course."

Hermione kissed Mrs. Srinivasan's cheek while Harry began the introductions for the rest of the group.

"These are our very good friends, Ron Potter and his sister Ginny," Harry said as the two redheads came forward.

Ron shook the doctor's hand warmly, Ginny somewhat stiffly.

As Harry was introducing Daniel, the children appeared at the top of the stairs.

Lily was wearing a flowing white dress, Hugo a polo shirt tucked into black pants. Duncan looked slightly out of place, as he was wearing a T-shirt and dark jeans, but, really, the boy was so handsome, his wardrobe could be overlooked.

Hermione walked towards the children, who were huddling at the bottom of the stairs.

"This is our son, Hugo," she said to the Muggles. "Lily, here, is Ginny's daughter, and this is Duncan—a friend of the family. Kids, these are the Srinivasans. Can you say 'hello?'"

"Hello," the children muttered in unison.

"Hello," Dr. Srinivasan replied. He stepped behind his son and gently urged him forward. "This is our son, Arjun."

"Hi," Arjun said, somewhat shyly.

"Well, now that we have introductions out of the way, I hope you all are hungry," Hermione said to the Muggles. "If you'll just follow me..."

Hermione led the way down the hallway and past the kitchen. When the Srinivasans entered the dining room, Harry heard the doctor's wife gasp.

"Oh, how lovely!" she exclaimed. "Oh, how simply beautiful."

Hermione blushed with pleasure. "Um, I'll just show you your seats..."

Hermione moved to the head of the table. "Dr. Srinivasan...Amar, if you could sit here?"

The doctor stared at his seat. "Oh, no...I couldn't."

Ron laughed from behind them. "You had better do it, doctor. She is the birthday girl."

"Birthday girl?" the doctor repeated, puzzled.

"Yes," Hermione sighed, smiling. "The word 'girl' aside, it is my birthday, so you simply must sit here."

"My dear," the doctor exclaimed, "that's all the more reason for you to sit there."

Hermione moved behind the doctor and grasped him firmly by the shoulders.

"Now, I wouldn't even be celebrating my birthday today if it hadn't been for you!" Hermione chided him lightly as she marched him towards his seat.

Hesitantly, the doctor complied and seated himself at the head of the table.

The rest took their seats according to Hermione's plan. The children were already jabbering away. Lily sat at the other end of the table, holding court over what now appeared to be two boys who were besotted with her.

Ron was eyeing the food. Hermione, however, looked anxiously at her Muggle guests.

"We've made a lamb roast with some vegetables," she explained. "But, we also prepared some eggplant parmesan for a vegetarian option."

"All of it sounds wonderful," the doctor said, smiling. "I'd love some of that lamb roast. Smells delicious."

Ron rolled his eyes.

Fifteen minutes into the dinner and Harry was pleased to report that nothing embarrassing had happened yet. Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were all behaving normally—as they would at any of their regular Wednesday dinners. The only difference was that Harry was playing the role of the host rather than Ron.

Harry was kept busy for the first few minutes of dinner pouring wine for the adults. The children were eagerly plowing past the salad portion of the meal and tucking into the mashed potatoes.

When Harry finally settled into his chair, Dr. Srinivasan asked about their various occupations. Luckily, Harry and the others had discussed this beforehand and could give ready answers.

Harry was in law enforcement. Hermione was an attorney specializing in minority rights. Ron was a small business owner and entrepreneur. Ginny was a sports reporter. Ginny was somewhat nervous about her occupation, as she knew absolutely nothing about Muggle sports. Fortunately, the doctor did not ask for more information and the conversation turned to the promised topic of Hermione's injury.

Here too, Hermione had a ready response. It was early August, Hermione explained. She had been jogging near a construction site when she stumbled over a brick and hit her head on the pavement. Thirty-four stitches. Painkillers for days. Hair extensions.

All this the doctor accepted without question. Harry doubted whether he himself would have questioned her story. It stuck close enough to the truth that it was entirely believable.

It was not until halfway through dinner that the conversation took a...strange turn.

"So, tell me," Hermione had said, lowering her wine glass, "where did you grow up Amar? Seema?"

"Well," the doctor said, glancing at his wife. "Seema and I grew up in Bristol, not too far apart from one another. Our parents were friends and Seema and I went to the same grade school. We lived in a close-knit South Asian community, you see. A lot of first-generation immigrants. Seema and I started dating in high school, and when I left for college and medical school, she stayed with me..." Dr. Srinivasan said, looking down at his plate.

"It wasn't so big of an imposition, Amar," she chastised him gently. She turned back to Harry and Hermione. "Since I was five, I had known I would marry him."

"What? Like an arranged marriage?" Ron asked bluntly.

Hermione shot daggers at him.

Seema laughed. "No, no. Not exactly. I think our parents had always been fine with the idea of us marrying, but they never pressured us. Amar wasn't like me, though. I had always been in love with him. He, on the other hand, was hung up on another girl for a long time when we were children."

The doctor looked embarrassed and Ron took the bait.

"Oh, another girl? Please, tell us about this childhood infidelity."

Dr. Srinivasan seemed unwilling to elaborate, so his wife spoke again.

"He doesn't like talking about it," Seema laughed. "I knew her too, though. Her name was Padma and she had always been a special girl in our class. She and her twin sister were very beautiful."

Harry and Hermione slowly turned to stare at one other. Ron and Ginny did the same.

No one spoke for a moment.

"Uh, Padma...Patil?" Ginny asked cautiously.

"Why, yes," the doctor replied, shocked. "Do you know her?"

"The four of us went to school with her," Hermione said quickly. "Harry, Ron, and I were in the same year as her."

The doctor and his wife stared at each other. Then, they both burst out laughing.

The four wizards looked nervously at each other. Daniel was simply watching the conversation with growing amusement.

"Are you telling me, you actually know Padma and Parvati Patil?" the doctor asked, wiping at his eyes.

"Why yes," Hermione said slowly. "We had gone to school with them since we were eleven. Parvati was in the same House-dormitory as us."

"Well, it truly is a small world," Seema said, smiling widely. "So you went to this mysterious school that the Patil twins disappeared to?"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Um, yes," Hermione replied, glancing nervously at Harry.

"That's wonderful!" the doctor exclaimed. "You see, the Patil twins left our school when they were eleven too, but no one really knew where they had gone. Their parents were strangely cryptic about it. So, what's the name of this school? What's it like?"

There were a few awkward glances around the table. Harry decided to speak.

"Well, it's a...private school. In Scotland. Very small and not many people know about it," Harry explained.

"What's the name?" Seema asked.

"Er..." Harry stammered.

"It's called the... Hogsden School for the..." Hermione supplied slowly.

"Gifted and Talented," Daniel finished.

The Srinivasans looked puzzled.

"I've never heard of it," Seema said.

"Well, it's very exclusive," Daniel said swiftly. "You need to take an entrance exam to get in, and even then, it's so far away that the student body is always very small."

"Oh, I see," Seema said. "So it's a boarding school?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "I shared the same room with Parvati for six years, so I knew her very well."

"Well, splendid!" the Dr. Srinivasan said, smiling. "What are they up to these days, the Patil twins?"

Another round of awkward glances.

Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown were currently running a boutique in Diagon Alley that sold fashionable witches' robes and love potions. No one really knew what Padma was up to.

"Well," Hermione said slowly. "Parvati runs a small boutique that sells...women's clothes and...cosmetics. I'm not quite sure what happened to Padma. Last I heard she was conducting research in Asia."

"Oh, how lovely," Seema said. "Where is this boutique? Perhaps we should stop by and say 'hello' to Parvati. I'm sure she'd love to see her old Bristol friends. What do you think, Amar?"

"You know," Hermione interjected, "I thought they were located in London, but I recently heard that they moved. I have Parvati's contact information. I can let her know I ran into you both and perhaps you can arrange a meeting?"

"Oh, that would be very nice," said Seema. "Despite the fact that Amar fancied Padma, I really liked the Patil twins. They seemed, how do you say...unique?"

The wizards around the table nodded tightly.

Ron, glancing at Daniel, decided to speak.

"You know," he said, "it really is so funny that we're talking about them. You see, Harry and I actually took Parvati and Padma to the school dance at Hogsmore..."

"Hogsden," Hermione corrected.

"Did you really?" the doctor said, smiling. "Who took who?"

"Harry took Parvati. I took Padma. I'm pretty sure I was a miserable date, though, so no worries, doctor," Ron said cheekily.

The Srinivasans laughed.

"Oh, why would you be a miserable date?" Seema asked kindly.

"Well, I was fourteen and an absolute rubbish dancer. Add to that the fact that I was sort of hung up on Hermione at the time..." Ron said without thinking.

The doctor's eyebrows drew together and he glanced swiftly at Harry.

Harry stared wide-eyed at Ron. Hermione noticed the stumble too.

"That's right!" Hermione said, with forced laughter. "Ron was sort of hoping to have me as a date to that dance, but I went with a...sports player who had transferred to the school. This was far before Harry and I became...involved."

"Oh, I see," Dr. Srinivasan chuckled.

"I think you're rewriting history, Hermione," Ron said, grinning mischievously. "I thought it was you who wanted to go with me."

"Oh, really—?" Hermione began.

Harry decided that this would be a perfect moment to divert the conversation away from Hogwarts.

"So, Seema," he interjected, giving the woman his most disarming smile, "we know all about what your husband does. What about you?"

A moment later, the discussion had successfully been diverted to Mrs. Srinivasan's career as a book publicist before she became a stay-at-home mother.

Five minutes later, however, Mrs. Srinivasan was asking about Ginny's husband.

"Oh, he's away on business," Ginny replied automatically. "He truly wanted to be here, but unfortunately this was his only opportunity to go..."

Harry smiled at Ginny.

"Well, your daughter—Lily?—she's absolutely beautiful," Mrs. Srinivasan said, smiling as she looked at the other end of the table. "All that lovely red hair. It's gorgeous."

Ginny gave a genuine smile. "Thank you."

"And what about you, Ron? Do you have any children?" Dr. Srinivasan asked.

"Why, yes," Ron said, placing his chin in his palm. "I have an eleven-year-old daughter named Rose. She's off at Hogsland now, of course. She very smart, just like her mother—but also like her mother, she's left me," Ron said sadly.

"Oh?" the doctor asked awkwardly. He quickly took a sip of wine.

Ron put on a devilish smile. Sometimes, you could really tell he was the brother of Fred and George Weasley.

"Yes, my wife and I divorced three years ago," Ron said with an air of sarcastic despair. "It was a rather rocky marriage, if I'm being honest. She was beautiful—like phenomenally beautiful—blonde, very tall.... The best sex I've had in my life, I can tell you..."

"Ronald!" Hermione cried, glaring at him.

Harry glanced nervously between Ron and Hermione. Luckily, the Srinivasans didn't notice anything off, and they seemed more amused than offended by Ron's comment.

"You see," Ron said, trying to suppress his grin while he watched Daniel's expression, "she left me for another bloke—an American. But it's all right, because he was an...astronaut and a...ninja. So, I never really stood a chance, did I?"

A ringing silence met Ron's words.

Hermione and Ginny began to laugh nervously.

Daniel merely rolled his eyes.

"You know, that actually is true," Daniel said quickly. "Ron's wife did, in fact,...leave him for a man who worked at NASA in the States. He wasn't an astronaut, per se...he was more of an engineer. And, well...he did know karate. Ron just likes to say he was an astronaut ninja. It sounds better."

"Oh," Seema said, "well that's..."

"Tragic?" Ron finished. "I know. They now run a ninja camp together for baby astronauts."

"Er, what Ron means is that they run a small karate center for the children of NASA employees," Daniel explained, glancing at Ron. "'Baby astronauts?' Oh, Ronald, you're just so hilarious."

"Well, I try," Ron replied sweetly.

"Yeh aadmi paagal hai?" Dr. Srinivasan whispered to his wife.

"Shaayad sirf ajiib. Paagal nahi," his wife muttered.

Harry glanced anxiously at Hermione. She was not amused—her palm was literally covering her face.

"Er, right," Harry said, choosing to divert the conversation once more. "Amar, you never told us how you came to settle in London..."

The doctor also looked happy to refocus the conversation away from ex-wives and astronauts.

"Oh, well you see, Seema had gotten into the book publishing business, as we said. There really isn't a big presence in Bristol for that, so we first moved to Guildford..."

"Oh, I used to live in Surrey," Harry said quickly.

"You did? Well, we were practically neighbors then, weren't we?"

The conversation turned to the publishing industry once more and Harry was soon out of his depth. Hermione, however, seemed keenly interested in Mrs. Srinivasan's time at a small London-based publishing house.

"Well, when I joined the publishing world, books were already a dying commodity," Seema lamented, cutting into her lamb.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Well, a publishing company has to diversify if it's going to survive these days. Audio books, e-books, Google account access, you know, the like..."

Nothing the woman had said made sense to Hermione. "I'm sorry...don't you just print books...you know, on paper?"

Seema laughed. "Oh, I wish. Sales of physical books have been plummeting for years now, didn't you know? It's 2017, we can't expect people to go back to hard books now."

Hermione looked stricken. "No books..."

"Oh, it's all right, dear!" Seema said, startled by Hermione's expression. "People are still reading. That's why we have e-books, after all. They're very convenient even if they are lacking in the romance of turning pages and writing in margins, etc."

"An e-book?" Hermione asked, confused.

Seema looked strangely at Hermione. "Why, yes, haven't you heard of it?"

"She has," Daniel stepped in, staring intently at Hermione. "You remember, Hermione—I showed you my e-reader the other day. The new Kindle 6G?"

Hermione just stared blankly at him. She had no idea what he was talking about.

Harry nudged Hermione under the table with his leg. She seemed to snap out of whatever horror had befallen her and quickly nodded her head.

"Oh yes...how could I forget? Your e-reader," she said as though the word caused her physical pain. "That sounds lovely."

Harry chuckled.

Mrs. Srinivasan laughed as well. "I've been hogging the conversation with all this talk about books and publishing. It's really not very interesting. I'd much rather hear more about you two," she said to Harry and Hermione. "I'm guessing you met at that school of yours? Do you mind my asking how you came to fall in love?"

Harry felt Hermione stiffen at his side.

There was a light clink. Ginny's fork had slipped from her fingers.

"How Harry and I fell in love?" Hermione repeated softly.

Seema nodded, taking a sip of wine.

"Well," Hermione stalled, trapped. "How Harry and I fell in love...."

Hermione shared a dubious glance with Harry. She then quickly looked at Ron, who was smirking. Ginny was looking down at her plate.

Daniel simply looked confused. This was not a topic he could help them with.

"Well," Hermione started again. She cleared her throat. "Harry and I met on the train to school. You see, our school is in Scotland, so there's long train ride... We were very young, just eleven. Harry's

glasses had broken and I fixed them. We didn't really become friends until...well, until I got myself into a bit of trouble," she said smiling ruefully. "Harry saved me and we became good friends, best friends really... That sort of developed, strictly platonically, for a long time...and well, Harry?"

Harry jumped, not expecting Hermione to pass the story onto him. He went with the first words that came to his mind.

"Right...I, um, well...yes. Hermione and I were simply friends for the long time, and then...well, in our late teens...she and I were travelling...abroad," Harry said slowly. He wasn't sure why he was referring to their time on the run from Voldemort.

"We were mostly just camping, but we spent a lot of time alone together, really getting to know each other. Away from the school. Away from our friends. Just away," Harry said, staring at the tablecloth. "One thing led to the next. And as I said, we were spending a lot of time alone...in tents. And well..."

"It became intense?" Ron asked, making a bad pun.

There was laughter around the table. Harry's heart was beating wildly in his chest.

"Yes," Harry said awkwardly. "You could say that."

Harry felt Hermione's eyes on him, so he continued.

"Anyway, that's how we fell in love. It's hard to say when the shift actually happened. But once it did, it seemed ridiculous we hadn't realized it. We began dating and eventually got married and had Hugo. And that's really all..."

The doctor was nodding approvingly. Seema let out a contented sigh.

"I can sympathize," the doctor said. "I've always thought that the strongest relationships emerge out of deep friendships. I mean that's essentially our story as well..." the doctor said, glancing fondly at his wife, "There are just some things you can't go through without ending up liking each other, you know?"

Harry nodded, feeling warm.

"How did he propose, Hermione?" Mrs. Srinivasan asked.

Harry glanced at Hermione. She had been staring at him, but quickly turned to look at Mrs. Srinivasan.

"Oh," Hermione said, her eyes wide. "Uh...It was... it was the perfect proposal, to be honest. Harry took me to a place that was...well, a very important place to both of us. It was sort of a forested park. He-he had lit candles so that the whole area was filled with golden light. And Harry basically told me that he loved me and asked if I would be his wife. It was that simple. I said 'yes.'"

"How romantic," Seema said dreamily. She turned to her husband. "You just proposed in a restaurant, Amar."

"A very nice restaurant," he corrected her.

Laughter broke out again around the table, lessening the tension.

Hermione was still stiff by Harry's side, her knee touching his. Barely thinking, Harry slid his hand under the tablecloth and grasped her hand. Her fingers were trembling...or were those his fingers?

Embarrassed, Harry gave her a small smile, which she returned.

Harry looked up. Daniel was watching him strangely. Harry then caught Ginny's eye, but she looked away.

Harry held Hermione's hand for a moment longer, feeling her cool fingertips grow warm under his touch. He couldn't help noticing how nice it felt.

Ron cleared his throat. "So, how about some dessert, huh?"

There were a few appreciative murmurs around the table. At least the children stopped their conversation for a moment.

Ron got out of his chair and stared intently at Harry, which Harry took to mean he should follow his best friend.

"I'll just be right back," Harry said to the table, reluctantly releasing Hermione's hand.

Harry followed Ron out of the dining room and into the quiet kitchen.

"What's up?" Harry asked somewhat nervously as Ron moved towards the icebox. "Sorry for all that...awkwardness with Hermione there. I didn't know what I was saying..."

"Oh, about you two falling in love?" Ron asked as he rummaged around looking for the dessert. "I thought you guys handled it pretty well. No one could tell you were lying, I think."

"Oh—um, good," Harry said lamely, digging his hands into this pocket.

"Here, come help me," Ron said, lifting a large cake box. "We've got to put candles in."

Harry smiled, realizing this was a birthday cake for Hermione.

"I didn't know you got a cake," Harry said.

"Yeah, well the bakery is just right there outside of the shop. Why not?"

Ron searched through another drawer, looking for candles.

Harry lifted the lid of the box. His eyes widened.

It was obvious the cake had come from a magical bakery. The frosting was like an intricately designed, moving picture. It showed pixies roaming a forest glen. A trickling stream of frosting represented a waterfall in the background.

"Er, Ron," Harry called. "Do you think this cake is suspicious?"

Ron came forward, holding a box of candles. "Oh, right," he said frowning. "I didn't think about that. Should we save it for later?"

Harry considered the cake. "No. How about we try stunning it?"

Ron shrugged. "That seems to be the solution to everything these days."

Harry produced his wand.

"Stupefy!" he muttered at the icing. Immediately, the pixies and the waterfall froze in place.

"Well, there you are," Harry said, satisfied. "The frosting is still rather elaborate, isn't it? Do Muggle cakes look like this? It's not like I got a lot of them," Harry chuckled.

"You're looking at the wrong guy," Ron laughed. "I think it'll be fine though. It's not moving. What else could we do?"

Harry shrugged, agreeing.

Ron opened the box of candles and dumped them out onto the counter.

"How old is Hermione now?" Ron asked.

"Thirty-eight. Should we put in that many candles?"

Ron scoffed. "Why not? I mean, assuming Hermione lives to 120 like most witches, she's only lived about a third of her life. That's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I guess. I have the feeling Ginny would kill me if I tried putting in that many candles on her birthday."

Ron laughed. "Well, look at it this way: it covers up more of the frosting."

Harry chuckled.

In silence, Ron and Harry began sticking the candles into the gooey surface of the cake.

After a moment, Harry spoke.

"Hermione's going to kill you about the ninja-astronaut-thing. You know that, right?"

Ron grinned. "Yeah, I know. But, look. There are very few things I know about the Muggle world. I know about astronauts and I know about ninjas," Ron said, ticking the two items off on his fingers. "In fact, if I had to be a Muggle, I would probably be one of those two things. So, yeah I don't regret it. When do I get to talk about ninjas and astronauts in everyday conversation? I'll tell you when: never."

Harry couldn't help laughing. "Wow, mate. I didn't know it meant that much to you."

"Well, it does," said Ron with sarcastic mournfulness.

Harry chuckled. "If you explain it like that, I'm sure she'll understand."

Ron made a derisive noise. "Yeah, like Hermione's understanding about anything I do these days. She's losing her sense of humor with old age."

Harry glanced at Ron's face. He wasn't joking.

"She's just stressed, Ron," Harry defended her. "This is an important time for her..."

Ron didn't say anything for a moment. Then, he shrugged. "I know. I just...I just wish I was important to her during those times too."

Harry didn't know what to say to that. He looked down at the cake.

"I think we have thirty-eight," he said.

Ron took out his wand and quickly lit the candles.

"You should carry it, mate," Ron said to Harry. "I'll get the door for you."

Harry and Ron reentered the dining room a moment later.

Upon catching sight of the lit cake, Lily jumped in her seat and immediately began singing.

"Happy birthday to you!" she sang in her high, clear voice.

Hugo and Duncan joined her next and soon the entire table was singing along.

Harry looked past the Srinivasans to Hermione. She was looking at the cake with a mixture of trepidation and resignation. She smiled weakly at Harry and Ron.

Harry set the cake down in front of her as the song came to a close.

He briefly touched her shoulder as he sang the last verse.

"Happy birthday to you..."

Hermione blushed, and quickly blew out the candles. The room broke into applause as smoke twisted around the glowing antlers of the chandelier.

Hugo slipped out of his chair and ran up to Hermione. He quickly planted a kiss on his mother's cheek and she embraced him.

"Thank you, everyone," Hermione said, absently rubbing Hugo's neck. "So many candles."

Everyone laughed, but Hermione turned to look at the Srinivasans.

"I especially want to thank you, Dr. Srinivasan," Hermione said, her eyes bright. "You are truly the man who deserves all the honor tonight. For what you did for me...I won't ever forget that."

The doctor shook his head, though he seemed pleased.

The group was silent for a moment until Hugo spoke.

"So...the cake, mum?"

Hermione laughed with the others.

"Yes, yes. Enough of your speeches birthday girl!" Daniel laughed. "Cut the cake."

Once the children had gotten their fill of the cake (red velvet with white fudge in the middle), they relocated upstairs. Despite the late

hour, the children were not even remotely tired. New company and sweets tended to do that to children.

For her part, Hermione ushered the adults into the small lounge located across from the parlor. Inside, there were sleek leather couches and few lamps scattered around the dim room.

Again, Harry went about preparing drinks for everyone before he settled down next to Hermione. The conversation turned to Daniel and his family. As Harry slowly sipped his bourbon, he felt immensely grateful that Daniel was there. The man just seemed to know how to direct the conversation far away from anything that could even remotely relate back to magic.

Ginny and Ron stayed mostly out of the conversation. They were speaking to each other in low voices by the window.

After about half an hour, Hermione whispered to Harry that he should probably take Duncan back to St. Mungo's. It was already past eleven.

Harry nodded and climbed the stairs to Hugo's room. The children were very reluctant to come downstairs, and Duncan looked particularly sad to go. When Harry had finally marshaled the children downstairs, however, Harry couldn't help noticing the lingering glances Lily and Duncan were giving each other.

"Bye, Duncan!" Hugo called, quickly embracing the older boy.

Arjun did the same.

Harry's suspicions regarding Lily and Duncan were confirmed when the two shared an awkward embrace. Duncan's face had turned bright red the moment Lily touched him.

The adults said their goodbyes to Duncan as well. Since the Srinivasans assumed Harry would be driving the boy home, Daniel quickly ushered the Muggles back into the lounge so that Harry and Duncan could prepare to apparate.

Hermione called Duncan into the kitchen first, however, to make sure the boy had gotten all the books he wanted from Hermione's library.

Harry waited in the foyer with Lily (the two boys had already run back upstairs). After a moment, Lily turned to her father and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Do you think Duncan can come back, Daddy?" she asked quietly.

"What? Come back to the house?"

"Yes," Lily said, staring at the floor.

Harry unlocked her arms and knelt down so that he could see his daughter's face. "Did you like having him over?"

She nodded, biting her lip.

Harry felt a strange mixture of pride and alarm with this reaction. It was the first time Lily had shown an interest in a boy.

"You know he's three years older than you, right?"

"Two and a half," Lily mumbled.

Harry smiled despite himself. They had already done the math.

"Well, we'll see," Harry said simply, straightening up as he heard footsteps down the hallway.

Hermione and Duncan emerged a moment later. He was carrying Hermione's books in his arms.

"Goodbye, Duncan," Hermione said sadly. She leaned down and kissed the boy's cheek. "I'll come see you real soon, okay? Tell your dad and mum I said 'hello.'"

Duncan nodded, clutching the books to him.

Harry smiled at Hermione before he nudged Duncan down the front steps. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Lily raise her hand and wave to Duncan.

The boy blushed again and Harry desperately wanted to roll his eyes.

"Hold onto those books, Duncan," Harry warned the boy before he grabbed his arm. They disappeared a moment later.

Harry escorted Duncan back to the extended stay ward. The hospital was eerily still at such a late hour. Fortunately, when Harry and Duncan reentered the ward, Mrs. Cameron was already sleeping. There would be no shrieking fits for the rest of the night. After saying goodbye to Duncan and Mr. Cameron, Harry quickly disappeared, hoping his short trip could be easily explained to the Srinivasans.

However, once Harry returned, he found that the Srinivasans were already preparing to leave. Hugo and Lily were now saying goodbye to Arjun.

"Oh, Harry!" Mrs. Srinivasan called out upon seeing him. She was putting on her coat. "So glad we could catch you before we left!"

As Harry approached them, he heard Dr. Srinivasan say to Hermione, "Thank you so much for having us. I always enjoy meeting my patients in less... serious circumstances," he chuckled. "I'm so glad we had the opportunity to have a true conversation. Not to mention, the food was absolutely superb."

Hermione beamed.

"Yes, it's been a truly magical evening," Mrs. Srinivasan said, glowing.

Hermione laughed a little too loudly at that. "Oh, well thank you. We're glad you thought so."

"Harry," Mrs. Srinivasan said warmly, taking one of his hands in both of hers, "you and your wife are two of the most enchanting people I've ever met. I mean that, honestly. I hope this won't be the last time we see you both?"

"Oh," Harry said, blushing, "of course not."

Yet, Harry truly doubted there would be any repeat performances like the one tonight.

"Well, come along Arjun," the doctor said, taking his son's hand.

"You won't forget to give us Parvati's contact information, will you Hermione?" Mrs. Srinivasan called, straightening Arjun's coat on his small shoulders.

Hermione smiled. "I'll give you a call tomorrow, I promise."

Mrs. Srinivasan smiled happily and took her husband's arm.

Harry followed them as they moved towards the door. Again, he heard the Muggle couple speak to each other in a language he didn't understand.

"Vastav mein, veh dono humsafar hain. Bahut spasht hai," Mrs. Srinivasan said quietly. She turned and smiled softly at Harry and Hermione.

"Jaanta hu," the doctor replied.

Harry's brow furrowed but thought nothing of it. He followed them down the steps and watched as they got into their car and drove away. The taillights gradually disappeared into the darkness.

Harry turned and closed the door behind him. Hugo and Lily were already galloping up the stairs again, both children still on a sugar high. Harry wanted to laugh as he looked at the adults, however. Hermione was kicking off her high heels and began rubbing her feet. Ron and Ginny looked much more relaxed.

"Well, that was something," Ron said, rubbing his neck. "I liked those Muggles, but God, I think I pulled a brain muscle keeping that charade up."

Daniel chuckled.

"They were here for five hours, Ron, and the most outlandish thing you could come up with was that your ex-wife married an astronaut-ninja?" Daniel asked smugly.

"Hey, they're not likely to forget that anytime soon," Ron said, shrugging.

Harry saw Hermione roll her eyes.

"Yes, I suppose it could have been much, much worse," Hermione said, padding over to Ron's side. "I consider it a success that no one got Obliviated tonight. Daniel," she said, smiling at her friend, "you were wonderful! I completely froze when they started talking about those damned electrical books. You saved me. But, really...what a ridiculous concept."

Hermione shivered. Daniel merely chuckled lightly.

"Well, you and Harry were the best, I thought," Ron said to Hermione. "I think the Muggles really liked your fake love story. It was positively enchanting!" Ron cooed, imitating Mrs. Srinivasan.

Harry and Hermione laughed awkwardly. Again, Harry saw Daniel pass him a strange look.

"Well, I should probably get going," Daniel said evenly. "Michael's been taking care of Madeline all alone tonight."

"Right, of course," Hermione said sadly, coming forward to embrace Daniel. "Well, you two and the baby are welcome any time. Thanks so much for coming!"

Daniel returned the embrace. "I was happy to. Happy birthday, love."

Daniel said his goodbyes to the rest of the group and moved into the cloakroom to grab his belongings.

Ron turned to Ginny.

"You know, there just might be enough time to catch the replays of the Puddlemore and Wasps' match."

"Oh right," Ginny said. "I had one of my staff reporters go for me. God, I hope he didn't mess up the Wasps' lineup again. He's been doing that recently."

"You wanna go watch it?" Ron asked his sister.

"Yeah, fine," Ginny said, briefly glancing at Harry. "Just a few minutes."

Ron and Ginny waved goodbye to Daniel and proceeded down the hallway towards the entertainment room. Harry, Hermione, and Daniel were left alone in the foyer.

Daniel was buttoning his coat when he suddenly looked up at Hermione, a slightly pained expression on his face.

"Hermione...Harry," he said worriedly. "I didn't want to mention it at dinner, but I wanted to ask you both about something..."

"What?" Hermione asked, immediately concerned.

Daniel dug his hands into the pockets of his coat. "Well, you know my sister Margie and her daughter Claire? You met them once, at the fellows' reception?"

"Yes, I remember," said Hermione.

"Well, Margie called me yesterday. She said Claire...she said Claire had turned her toothpaste into ice-cream..."

"What?" Hermione said, confused.

"Yeah," Daniel said, looking down. "Margie thinks that it could be another sign. She thinks Claire might have done it by magic. Claire really hates brushing her teeth, you see, and she was really angry with her mum when the toothpaste changed. I know it's such a silly thing, but it's not out of the question, right? Could it mean that...that Claire has the gene?"

Harry and Hermione shared a glance.

"How old is Claire?" Hermione asked.

"She's six."

Hermione considered this for a moment. "I was about six when I started showing signs. There's no chance that Claire played a trick on her mum and changed the toothpaste herself?"

"It was a new box. Unless Arm & Hammer is having some quality control issues, it's unlikely Claire did it herself," Daniel replied, smiling ruefully.

Harry and Hermione didn't say anything for a moment.

Daniel looked worried again. "I just wanted your opinion, that's all. These sorts of things have been happening more frequently to Claire, and I think it's scaring Margie a bit. She's always been more wary of magic than I have. I think she thought...or hoped that since mum was a Squib, we wouldn't be having any more wizards in the family..."

"It can show up in weird places," Hermione said consolingly, touching Daniel's arm. "I think the last person in my family who was magical was my father's great uncle. There's really no telling..."

Daniel nodded grimly.

Harry studied Daniel's expression. Daniel was usually so at ease around wizards, yet the prospect that his niece was a witch seemed to trouble him deeply. Harry realized that such a possibility could come as a shock. If Claire was magical, it would dramatically change things for her family. Instead of the local public school, the girl would attend a distant wizarding academy for seven years. She would study things, talk about things, and do things her parents could never understand. Once she graduated, her parents would have to lie every time someone asked what their daughter did for a living. When she got married, they wouldn't even recognize the wording of the wedding vows...

For Muggle parents, having a magical child changed the rules of the game. Hopes and expectations had to shift drastically, or else fall apart completely. Not all Muggle families knew how to cope.

"Well, would you like me to owl Hogwarts?" Hermione was saying. "They keep a registry of all the magical children who are born each year. I can ask if Claire's name is on the list."

"Would you?" Daniel said gratefully. "That would give us some peace of mind. Give us a chance to prepare ourselves, you know?"

Hermione nodded. "I'll write to them tomorrow."

Daniel sighed with relief and briefly embraced Hermione. "Thank you. You don't know how much this has been worrying me..." He released her, smiling slightly. "Well, I'd best be off, then. It was great seeing you!"

Hermione smiled at her friend. "Same. I'll talk to you soon?"

Daniel nodded and turned to briefly hug Harry.

"G'night to you both!" Daniel called from the steps.

Harry and Hermione had just raised their hands in farewell when Daniel paused, his hand on the doorknob.

He smiled wryly at them.

"You know, you two actually did make a good married couple. Most convincing performance of the night."

Daniel laughed at their dumbfounded expressions and shut the door behind him.

Harry and Hermione did not say anything until they heard the sound of a distant car engine revving up.

Hermione sniffed. "Well...apparently we did a good job."

"Apparently."

Hermione turned and looked at him. Harry thought she was going to say some well-placed, Hermione-ish comment, but she surprised him.

"To be honest, Harry," she said, running a hand through her hair, "I was worried about this all day."

"This?" Harry asked. "You mean this being-married-thing?"

She nodded.

"God, I was too Hermione!" Harry cried, relieved. "I was a fucking wreck all day."

Hermione laughed, disbelieving. "Were you? Well, it's over now and evidently we floored the house..."

Harry grinned. "Well, it was sort of...fun, right?"

"I enjoyed it," Hermione said, smiling and bringing a hand up to touch her necklace. "Even if Ron was trying to be as obnoxious as possible."

Harry grinned. "Well, don't be too hard on him. He has a good reason for what he said."

"Ha," Hermione scoffed. "I've heard that before."

Just then, the sound of footsteps could be heard from the hallway.

Harry and Hermione turned and saw Ron and Ginny approaching them.

"Daniel left?" Ron asked, looking around the foyer.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Just now."

Ron nodded and then yawned. "Fuck, I'm exhausted and I've got to wake up early. I think I'll head in. You coming, Hermione?"

"Yeah, in a minute," Hermione said, looking down. "I'm going to do a little cleaning up."

Ron nodded. He pulled out his wand and waved it at the lights in the parlor. They immediately extinguished themselves, leaving the foyer dimly lit by a small chandelier above the central table. Ron sluggishly climbed the stairs.

"Are you ready to go, darling?" Ginny asked Harry.

Harry nodded.

"Okay, I'll just go get Lily...if I can pry her away from Hugo that is. Those two can get so hyperactive, I don't even know..." she said.

Ginny turned and ascended the stairs, her red heels flashing in the dim light of the foyer.

Harry and Hermione were left alone.

Harry grinned at her.

"Did you enjoy your birthday, then?"

"Yes. Yes, I did," Hermione smiled. She was still stroking the silver chain of the necklace, as though she didn't believe it was truly there. Harry was transfixed by the way her fingers touched her own delicate skin.

"Well, goodnight then, Harry," Hermione said softly, turning towards the hallway.

Harry suddenly felt desperate.

That's it?

He did not want her to leave. He glanced at the grandfather clock against the far wall of the foyer. It was two minutes until midnight.

Rashly, Harry reached forward and embraced Hermione. Hermione was taken by surprise, but she laughed as she crashed against his chest.

"Harry, what—?"

"Happy birthday, Mrs. Weasley," he said softly.

Hermione laughed lightly. "Well, thank you, Harry."

Still holding her tightly, Harry stretched his arm behind her back and looked at his watch. "Looks like I have two more minutes of being your husband. Is that enough time to sleep with you, you think?"

Hermione laughed in astonishment at his remark. "Probably not..."

Harry stared at the soft radiance of her skin and trailed his eyes upward to her face.

That limitless quality had returned to her eyes. Deep amber and gold. He only saw it when she looked at him, when they were very close. Like this.

"Then I'll have to settle for a kiss," he whispered.

Hermione's eyes widened. Then, she turned her eyes away. "Don't you think you and I have had enough of kissing for a while?"

She was referring to the forest. Harry was silent for a moment.

He leaned down so that his lips grazed the soft shell of her ear.

"Have you had enough?"

Hermione stiffened in his arms and took a slow breath. Her fingers were maddeningly tracing patterns on his shirt and Harry felt his pulse quicken as her hands touched him.

When she looked up, she smiled.

"One kiss," she said bossily. "And only because you're my husband for the next two minutes..."

His heart thundering now, Harry tried to ignore the exhilaration her words had sent through him. His fingers were shaking.

"All right," he murmured.

Harry pulled Hermione flush against his chest, looping his arm around the small of her back. He raised his other hand to cup the delicate line of her jaw and let his thumb touch the corner of her lips before he lowered his head over hers.

Slowly, Hermione tilted her face upwards and closed her eyes.

Harry stared at her lips. Soft, alluring. For the second time in his life, they were poised for his kiss. Just staring at them did strange things to his body.

He leaned down and let his lips hover over hers, wanting her to initiate the contact. And after an endless second, she did just that.

Pushing herself up on her toes, their lips touched.

It was a slow and meandering kiss, without the desperate insanity of their first kiss in the forest. It was Hermione who opened her mouth first, her tongue darting past his lips. Harry felt what was becoming a familiar dark chill run down his spine. She let out a soft moan as Harry angled her head to deepen the kiss, his other hand sliding up the arch of her back. Their tongues danced around each other, probing and exploring. Harry could feel himself shaking, his heart flighty. Her mouth felt so, so...damn good against his own.

Suddenly, a realization came to Harry: he had been waiting to kiss her ever since the forest. Without really knowing it, he had been secretly hoping it would happen again. Kissing her now felt like releasing a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

From a haunting distance, a chime broke the silence of the foyer.

It was midnight. The magic of their faux marriage was over.

Yet, Hermione did not stop kissing him. Her hands, which had been stroking the nape of his neck, slid down to his shoulders.

The clock began to strike the hours.

One.

Harry pulled away for a moment, catching his breath. He hungrily returned to her lips as she pulled him down to her again.

Two.

Their tongues battled with increasing urgency. Harry felt himself harden with every delicious whimper she uttered.

Three.

Hermione's hand was now cupping his jaw, directing the kiss.

Four.

Harry slid one hand up Hermione's side, stroking the subtle curves of her waist, her breasts.

Five.

Hermione pulled away and Harry let out an involuntary moan.

Six.

She smiled and then returned to his lips with increased passion. She ran her tongue along his teeth and Harry felt all his blood fly to his groin.

Seven.

Hermione began to pull away again, attempting to create a small space between them. He could tell she was trying to break the intensity of the moment. Harry held her tighter to him, not wanting her to leave him.

Eight.

Desperate, Harry leaned forward and pressed his lips to her neck. His breath brushed her own erratic pulse.

Nine.

"Harry," Hermione whimpered. She was shaking beneath his touch. Her hands had returned to his shoulders, as though to push him away. Yet, she did not.

Ten.

He paused before he let his tongue graze the hollow of her neck. She began shaking more violently.

Eleven.

"Harry," she said again, as though frightened.

Twelve.

Harry lifted his head immediately, the echo of the last chime hovering in the air.

Hermione stared at him, her eyes wide.

Harry was breathing deeply, refusing to release his hold around Hermione's slender waist.

Even now, he wanted to take her lips again. He had not had enough. Not even remotely.

Yet, Hermione pulled back and pressed her forehead against his. They were silent for a moment, both of them breathing heavily.

"Why do we keep doing this?" Hermione whispered.

Without thinking, Harry murmured, "Do we have to ask that question?"

Hermione's head shot up.

"We're cowards if we don't ask that question," she said ferociously.

Her words hung in the air between them.

"Hermione, I—"

Just then, the sound of two sets of feet on the stairs reached their ears.

Hermione pushed him away. She straightened her skirt, which Harry didn't realize had hitched up slightly, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as Harry regained his balance.

Harry stared at her, the warmth of their encounter quickly dissipating. A moment later, Ginny and Lily appeared.

Reaching the bottom step, Ginny came to his side his side with a petulant Lily. "You ready to go, darling?" she asked, tucking her arm through his.

"Uh," Harry said, glancing at Hermione. She did not meet his eyes. "Yes."

Ginny moved towards the door. She disappeared into the cloakroom with Lily to retrieve her coat.

Harry returned his gaze to Hermione.

She had the most indecipherable expression on her face. A mixture of anger, warning, and...fear.

Harry opened his mouth, but Hermione, with an infinitesimal movement of her neck, shook her head. The sound of high heels on the hardwood floor reached his ears.

"Harry?" Ginny called.

Harry's eyes were still trained on Hermione, but she turned and walked towards Ginny.

"Thanks for coming, Gin," Hermione said, infusing her words with an ease Harry knew she did not feel.

"It was no problem," Ginny said, stiffly embracing Hermione. "It was an...interesting evening, to say the least."

Hermione laughed awkwardly.

The two women separated and Ginny turned to Harry expectantly. Harry descended the steps and came to her side.

"Goodnight, Hermione," Ginny said, flipping the latch on the door.

Following after her and Lily, Harry turned to look at Hermione.

The solitary golden light in foyer lit her from behind, setting her hair aglow. Her arms were locked around herself and her brow was furrowed in consternation.

"Hermione—" Harry tried again.

"Goodnight, Harry," she said softly.

Harry stared at her. He wanted to say something. Desperately. He just didn't know what.

"Harry?" Ginny called again.

Harry stared at Hermione a moment longer before he turned away.

He followed Ginny and Lily down the steps.

Harry heard the door swing on its hinges behind him. He turned quickly, but Hermione had already shut the door.

A second later, Lily took his hand and they disappeared.

Even through the whirlwind, he could feel the warmth of Hermione's lips on his own.

Chapter 11: Attraction

Harry stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He had never been a vain person, but tonight his appearance warranted extra examination. Or, more accurately, his lips did.

They seemed normal. Nothing outwardly different about them.

He slowly brought a hand up and touched his bottom lip.

His lips were not too thick or too thin. A soft pink color. Average male lips, really. Quite normal in every way.

But they were not normal.

Minutes ago, they had been pressed against Hermione's lips. Her tongue had slipped past them. And he had done the same to her. These lips had pressed themselves against her neck, into the hollow of her collarbone.

He had felt her shiver.

Harry sighed. He had replayed what had happened in the foyer of Hermione's home upwards of fifty times and each time it seemed equally unbelievable.

They had kissed. Again.

And this time they couldn't cast it off as stress or a lapse in judgment.

True, they had both been drinking, but neither of them had been close to drunk. He had asked for a kiss and she had consented. They had done it of their own volition, knowing full well what they were doing.

Yet, the kiss had turned into something...something indescribable. It wasn't a kiss goodnight or a playful kiss between a fake husband and a fake wife. Indeed, amid all the pretense and deception for the Muggles, his kiss with Hermione felt like the most honest thing that had happened that night...

"What are you doing?" Ginny's voice asked from behind him.

Harry spun around, lowering his fingers from his lips.

"Nothing," he said quickly.

Ginny gave him a strange look but she moved towards the sink. Turning on the taps, she began rinsing her face.

Harry glanced at his wife.

Not for the first time, a voice very much like Hermione's whispered in his ear: Coward.

Harry grimaced and strode out of the bathroom.

Cowards. That's what Hermione said they were if they didn't ask themselves what they were doing.

He had delayed it once, but now he was going to have to let himself think about what kissing Hermione actually meant...in all of its messy and confusing glory.

Tomorrow, I'll go to her office and apologize, Harry resolved. I'll explain...I'll explain what happened.

Yet, what could Harry say to her that could explain his actions?

He quickly realized he had two options: a lie or the truth. He would have to choose which one to tell her.

Option One: A Lie

Harry could tell Hermione that he had drunk more than he thought? That he had let the charade of being married go to his head? That he was overly stressed at work and had found an outlet in all the wrong places...

But these were all lies. Knowing Hermione—or knowing how she knew him—she wouldn't buy it for a moment.

Option Two: The Truth.

So, what was the truth?

The truth, in its utmost simplicity, was that Harry wanted to kiss her. He didn't think it was an exaggeration to say he actually loved kissing her. Kissing her was so...so very different than anything he had experienced in his life.

Kissing Cho Chang had been awkward as fuck.

Kissing Ginny was exhilarating, at first, and then became quite lovely.

Harry had had three girlfriends (and several more flings) after breaking up with Ginny for several years. Kissing each of those women was different in its way. But none of them were particularly meaningful to him.

But, kissing Hermione...

Harry let out an enormous breath as he stumbled towards the bed. He sat down slowly and began taking off his shoes.

Here is the Truth. The truth with a capital "T." And it is devastating.

Thirty minutes ago, at the age of thirty-seven, he, Harry Potter, had experienced the best kiss of his life.

It was the sort of kiss you could get lost in.

The sort of kiss you wouldn't mind doing until your lips chapped themselves into oblivion.

The sort of kiss that makes your whole body shiver like its been dunked in ice water.

In the height of the kiss, Harry had lost all sense of himself.

He had felt...whole and complete. He had felt... what was that word? It was a word he never used to describe anything...

Transcendence, Harry thought. That's what it was like. Transcendence.

But, why? Why did it feel like that?

Well, because it was illicit, Harry had to admit. It was forbidden. I haven't kissed anyone other than my wife in fourteen years. Kissing Hermione is different because she's the first person...the first person with whom I've crossed a non-negotiable line. That line you promise never to flirt with again as a married man.

Harry placed his head in his hands. He suddenly felt wretched.

I've hurt Ginny. I've hurt her... I've hurt Ron. And I've...I've cheated? I haven't slept with anyone, but kissing someone who's not your wife is cheating, right? That's all it is. It's cheating. I can't...I shouldn't whitewash it.

Harry trailed his hands down his face. His fingers brushed his lips again.

He tried to marshal his thoughts into some comprehensible order.

Hermione. Kissing her is so different because it's forbidden...and it's new. Yet, I've thought this before. When I first kissed her, I thought the reason it consumed me so much was because it was new. But I've kissed her twice now—three times, if you count the hospital. Shouldn't the novelty be wearing off?

Novelty and illicitness. Does that explain why kissing Hermione is so...so fucking amazing? Does that explain the whole of it?

No...no, it doesn't.

He landed upon the truth.

Hermione's kiss is special because she is Hermione. I've grown up with her. She's my best friend. She means more to me than just about anyone. Kissing her has special meaning because she has special meaning to me.

So that's what it is, then? Harry asked himself. The formula for a transcendent kiss is one part novelty, one part illicitness, and one part kissing someone who is exceptional in your eyes? Someone like Hermione?

Harry heard the taps switch off in the bathroom. He scrambled and quickly slipped under the sheets, placing his glasses on the bedside table. Ginny emerged a moment later.

He pretended to be asleep.

This must make sense, right? Harry thought desperately. This explains it. If I was married to anyone else it would be exactly the same. Say if I married Luna... and I kissed Ginny, I would feel exactly the same way towards Ginny as I feel now towards Hermione. Kissing Ginny has lost two of those qualities—novelty and illicitness—and that's why kissing her isn't comparable to kissing Hermione.

Yes, Harry thought. That makes sense. It's not because I have unique feelings for Hermione—it's because the circumstances of our kiss were so unique.

Relieved to come to his conclusion, Harry felt reasonably sure that he could walk into Hermione's office tomorrow and tell her this truth: that she was wonderful, but kissing her was simply an amalgamation of circumstances that had the effect of fabricating a feeling of transcendence within him, thus compelling him to act in kissing her once again.

Wow. It sounds complicated when you say it like that. Should it be that complicated?

He smirked despite himself. Well, at the very least, Hermione will be impressed by my thought process.

Harry listened as Ginny moved around their dimly lit bedroom. He heard her place her earrings on the dresser and a moment later she pulled back the sheets and slipped into bed.

For a moment, everything was silent. He could hear her soft breathing from across their enormous bed. Harry almost wanted to sigh in relief that there would be no more talking tonight. His mind was too much of a mess to deal with anything right now.

Then, he heard Ginny shuffling over to him.

"Harry?" she asked softly. "You awake?"

"Mmm," Harry mumbled, pretending to come out of slumber.
"Yeah?"

"Oh, sorry," she said. She slipped her arm through his and laid her head on his shoulder.

"I saw that necklace Hermione was wearing..." Ginny said offhandedly. "Did you get that for her?"

"Yeah," Harry murmured.

Ginny was silent for a moment.

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, it was her birthday, wasn't it?" Harry said, hoping his voice sounded normal. To him, it sounded a little shaky.

"I don't remember you giving her such an elaborate gift before," Ginny said, her voice taking on an accusatory note despite her efforts. "Don't you usually get her a book or something?"

Harry shrugged. "I just wanted to give her something special this year. You see..."

Harry was about to explain about the Callahan case, but Ginny interrupted.

"Oh, yes," she said sarcastically, "because everyone's thirty-eighth birthday is such an important milestone..."

Ginny removed her arm and shifted away from him.

Harry turned his head to look at her, but she was gazing out at the moonlit window, a hurt expression on her face.

Harry reached out and found her hand under the covers.

"Hey," he said, smiling slightly. "If you want, I'll get you a necklace on your thirty-eighth birthday."

Ginny turned her head. She made a derisive noise but smiled.

"That's right you will," she said.

Before Harry could stop her, she leaned over and pecked him on the lips.

"Goodnight, darling."

"Goodnight, Gin," he replied automatically.

Ginny moved towards her side of the bed. Everything became still once again.

No. It doesn't compare...

At nine the next morning, Harry was quickly striding towards Hermione's office.

His plan was set. He would tell her exactly the conclusion he had come to last night. There would be no lying. It might be awkward, but she would understand. She was Hermione. They would move on and everything would be fine...

"Chief Potter!" the receptionist inside the Department of Magical Law Enforcement cried upon seeing him. "So wonderful to see you, sir!"

"Hi Rochelle," Harry said, smiling. "Is Counselor Granger in?"

"Yes, sir, I think so," the young witch said. "At least I saw her when she came in at seven."

Harry nodded and moved into the anteroom. As he passed down an aisle of wood-paneled cubicles, several lawyers called out to him in greeting.

Harry tried to smile back, but his nerves were getting the better of him now. His plan might be in place but what if...what if she was angry with him?

Harry stopped before her office. Taking a quick breath, he knocked.

There was no answer.

Harry waited a moment and then tried the doorknob. It was locked. He quickly peered through the fogged glass. The lights appeared to be off.

Anxious now, Harry strode towards Lakey's office. It was two doors down. Lakey's door was ajar but no one was inside the office.

Confused, Harry spun around.

"You," Harry said commandingly. "Do you know where Counselor Granger is?"

A stunned, young lawyer stared back at him.

"Er, I... no I don't, Chief Potter," he said. "Would you... would you like me to find out for you?"

"Yes, please," said Harry, digging his hands into his pockets.

The lawyer quickly ran off, waving a friend to his side and whispering something.

Harry waited outside Hermione's office, pacing agitatedly.

After a few minutes, the lawyer returned.

"Er, sir? Chief Potter?"

Harry nodded.

"She and Director Lakey are in a meeting at the moment. Would you like me to tell her you're here?"

"Uh, yes," Harry said. "If that's not too much trouble."

The young man scampered off again and Harry waited. His stomach was in knots now and his neck felt exceptionally warm. Some of the lawyers were beginning to stare at him. It seemed to take ages before the man returned again.

"Sir?" the lawyer said nervously. "She says she can't meet with you right now. She won't be able to meet with anyone today."

"What?" Harry said, alarmed. "Did you talk to her?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did she say?"

"She said she was in an important meeting and can't meet with you," the lawyer repeated anxiously as Harry's expression turned dark. "Would...would you like me to give her a message from you?"

Harry looked past the lawyer and down the hallway. Hermione was not there.

He sighed after a moment. "Just, just tell her...I came by."

Harry did not wait for the lawyer to respond. He spun on his heel and walked, unseeingly, towards the exit.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity fuck. Fucking shit. Motherfucker. Fuck!

He had never been turned down from seeing her. Never. Boardroom meetings were known to break up because he wanted to see Hermione.

She's...she's angry with me.

Harry barely noticed that people were saying 'goodbye' to him as he exited the department. As he strode towards the AD, he became consumed in a heady mixture of hurt and fear. He climbed the dais to his office in a haze and when he sat down behind his desk, placed his head in his hands.

She's angry with me. What if she doesn't forgive me? What if she thinks I want to do it again? That's...I didn't even get a chance to explain myself. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. She can't be mad at me. She just can't be.

Harry was driven to distraction the rest of the day. He waited anxiously for some sign that Hermione was willing to see him. Every time an interdepartmental memo flew into the AD, Harry looked up. Yet, by seven o'clock that evening, so sign had come.

As Harry put on his cloak to leave, he thought briefly of returning to her office. Hermione worked late; she was likely still there. Yet, he stopped himself.

If she wants to see me, she'll come find me.

Yet, by the next morning Harry was desperate again.

I'll stop by her office. I'll force her to talk to me. I don't care about my theory anymore. I'll just tell her I was horribly drunk and I took advantage of her. It won't ever happen again. I'll say whatever she wants...so long as she forgives me.

Thus, a shaky Harry walked into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement a second time. He barely acknowledged the greetings thrown in his direction.

As Harry approached her office, however, he felt his heart drop. This time, the lights were clearly off inside. The door was locked. Harry glanced down the hallway at Lakey's office. His door was also closed, the lights off.

A pretty witch in light purple robes passed him.

"Chief Potter?" she asked cautiously. "Are you looking for Counselor Granger?"

"Uh, yes."

"Oh, she went out to Gloucester today with Director Lakey. They had to present some papers to the Wizengamot there."

"Oh," Harry said numbly. "Do you know when she'll be back?"

"I think they're supposed to be there the whole day, but perhaps they'll come back early?"

Harry nodded. "Thank you."

The woman smiled hesitantly and left. Harry wondered if she thought it was strange that Harry didn't know where Hermione was. Harry certainly found it strange. He always knew where Hermione was.

Now Harry couldn't even look forward to getting his daily report on Hermione's security from Yvain and Cassy. They would be with her in Gloucester.

Harry growled to himself.

Fine. I'm not going to go running around the country to apologize to her. She can come find me when she's ready to talk...

The next morning, Harry rolled out of bed. He hadn't been able to sleep at all and he felt as though he had swallowed several gallons of doxycide.

It was Friday. He had not spoken with Hermione in two days...maybe a record for them, not counting her seventh year at Hogwarts.

Ginny was starting to notice.

"Darling, are you all right?" she asked as Harry dragged himself into the kitchen.

"What?" Harry said, blinking. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Are you sick? You look very pale."

"I said I was fine," Harry said tersely, moving towards the coffeemaker.

Ginny didn't say anything. She returned to reading the Prophet.

Harry only had the energy to pour himself some cereal. He sat down across from Ginny and began desolately stirring the little flakes in the milk. The spoon made a high whirring sound on the bottom of the bowl.

Ginny looked at him over the paper.

"Do you need to go to St. Mungo's?" she asked reproachfully.

Harry picked up his spoon. "No."

Ginny watched him for a moment as he slowly ate his cereal.

"Well, maybe this will cheer you up," she said. "You know the annual Prophet Christmas party?"

Harry grunted.

"Well, this year it's going to have to be a pared down affair while the newsroom is being renovated. It'll be more like a cocktail party instead of the ball it usually is."

Harry grunted again, severely uninterested.

"So, I was talking to Jonathan and Liesel from the Enchanted Life section and they were interested in whether we would host a party for New Year's?"

Harry looked up. "What? Why?"

"Well, I think they thought it was a shame that there will be no ball at the Prophet this year. And I mean, we do have a ballroom here at the house that we never use. The last time we had a true party was when Lily was born."

Harry stared at her. He knew what she meant by "party." She meant over six hundred people. She meant drinks and schmoozing and dancing. She meant an event.

"Er, do you really think that's a good idea?"

"I know what you're thinking," Ginny said quickly. "And I promise, it wouldn't just be for the Prophet. You can invite people from the AD, Ron can invite the guys from the shop...and Hermione from Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry just stared blankly at her.

"That's a lot of work. Didn't we have a party here two years ago?"

"Well, that was mostly for family," Ginny said distractedly.

Harry couldn't argue with that. When you invited the entire Weasley clan to something, you usually got around a hundred people.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny sighed whimsically. "We have such a huge, beautiful home! It's shame we aren't really using it! Wouldn't it be nice to have it full of people on New Year's Eve? We could watch the fireworks from the balcony..."

Harry looked down at his bowl, more interested in the soggy flakes than this conversation.

"So, what do you think?"

Harry shrugged, bringing his spoon to his mouth. "We'll have to clean."

"I know," Ginny said excitedly. "But we can hire some people for that."

Harry glanced at her. "As long as we keep them away from the study. You know I have sensitive files in there."

"Right, right," Ginny said offhandedly. She got up and walked towards the sink.

"Well, maybe you can go through the house and make sure you've put away all the things you don't want people to find. You could get Ron and Hermione to help. Didn't they offer once?"

At the mention of Hermione's name, Harry felt his stomach turn...

"Er, yeah. I think they did."

"Well, then it's settled!" Ginny said happily. "I'll start mentioning it at the Prophet. People will go mad when we tell them!"

"Mad?" Harry repeated dimly.

Ginny gave him a patronizing smile. She came forward and embraced him from behind. "Come on, darling. You know any party we throw is going to be big. We'll be turning people away at the door. Oh, you'll have to invite the Minister..."

Harry sighed, her arms heavy around his shoulders. "All right."

Ginny squealed and kissed his cheek. "Wonderful!" she said, standing up straight. "Well, I'm off then. You feel better, okay? You look horrible."

Harry glared at her darkly. She laughed and moved out of the room.

With Ginny gone, the room became quiet. The children were already off at school. He stared back at his bowl. The flakes had turned the water a pale brown.

His mind returned to its usual fixation. Hermione.

He was dreading stepping into the Ministry today. He desperately needed to see her. Yet, the prospect of speaking to her was truly frightening. More than anything, he wished he could return to those moments before their kiss. When they had been laughing, talking amiably. When she had not been mad. When she had smiled at him.

He wanted her back.

Harry was vainly trying to work his way through a few files before lunch when Gwen popped her head into his office.

"Chief," she said urgently. "Commissioner Hewett is on the tellie-phone for you."

Harry turned and looked at his Muggle phone. It was almost completely hidden by rolls of parchment. He rarely used it except to talk to the chief of the London Police.

Harry nodded and Gwen closed the door. Harry picked up the receiver.

"Commissioner?" he said.

"Chief, this is Jack. How are you, sir?"

"I'm well, thank you," Harry lied. "What can I do for you?"

The sound was scratchy. Yet, since the AD was located on the first floor of the Ministry, it was still close enough to the surface of Muggle London that the phone still functioned.

"I got a report in from Edinburgh today. Thought you might be interested."

Harry grabbed a sheaf of parchment and a quill. "Go ahead."

"You remember that bloke you were trying to catch last month? What was his name? Darren Rudge, or something?"

"Deedrick Rudge?" Harry asked quickly, his heart going cold. This was the former Death Eater Callahan had been sent to find the night he tortured the Camerons. Here was Rudge again, popping up unexpectedly...

"Yeah, that's the one," Hewett said. "Well, apparently someone saw him in Edinburgh last night, or at least someone that fits his description."

"Okay," Harry said scribbling. "Who saw him? What's the description?"

"It was just some old woman. Her name is Ethel Hardwick, if you're interested," said Hewett. "She said she heard someone rummaging around in her bins late last night. She called the police, but by the time they arrived whoever it was had vanished. They took her report, in any case. She said the man was bald and had a long scar running up the back of his head. Sound like your man?"

"It does. How did this report get to you?" Harry asked, surprised a minor incident in Edinburgh had reached London so quickly.

"Well, I know how much trouble this git has caused you," Hewett said. "And I...heard about the Camerons. I put out a special notice that anyone matching Rudge's description should contact London Police immediately."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely. "I'll send someone over to interview her, see if we can learn anything. Address?"

Hewett gave it to him.

"You'll send one of your...better Aurors, right Chief?" Hewett asked awkwardly. Harry could hear the concern in his voice.

"The best. I'll go myself, if you like."

Hewett laughed. "Oh, I didn't mean it like that. Send who you like. Talk to you soon, Harry."

"Bye Jack and thanks."

"It's no problem."

Harry hung up the phone. He sighed, looking down at the sheaf of parchment.

Harry had to confess he had barely thought about Deedrick Rudge since the Callahan incident. His mind had been so focused on the disgraced Auror and Hermione that the Death Eater had been pushed to the back of his mind.

So, now Rudge was in Scotland going through people's bins? What did that mean?

He would have to send someone to find out.

Harry glanced out the window into the Auror pool. Yes, Commissioner Hewett was right. He would have to send someone trustworthy this time. Sure, Harry had trusted Callahan but he wasn't going to take chances the second time around.

Harry decided he would send Durkheim. Besides Gwen, there was no one else he trusted more in the Auror Department.

Harry got up and began rifling through a file cabinet, looking for Rudge's file. There was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in!" Harry called over his shoulder.

Someone opened the door.

"Hi."

Harry spun around. It was the voice he had been waiting to hear for two days.

"Her-Hermione!" Harry almost shouted. He could feel himself blushing as he backed into the file cabinet. "Uh, hi. Do you...Do you want to come in?"

Hermione glanced at the couch.

She shook her head.

Harry tried to read her expression. She was looking at the floor, her hair shielding her face. She was wearing a soft white blouse with an olive, tweed skirt. She looked beautiful.

"I was going to take a run tomorrow," she said softly, "down by the River Isis. Do you know the place?"

Harry nodded slowly. "By Oxford?"

"Yes," Hermione said, still not looking at him. Her entire attention seemed to be consumed in fiddling with the lock on Harry's door.

"Would you like to come with me?" she asked, slowly locking and unlocking the door. "It'd be better going with you than having Yvain and Cassy follow me around."

Harry stared at her, surprised by the request. She still wasn't looking at him.

"Uh, all right. That sounds fine," he said nervously.

"Is nine in the morning all right?" she asked. "You can come to the house and we'll apparate from there."

"Sure," he said. He desperately needed to tell her he was sorry. "Hermione, I'm—"

"Okay, I'll see you then," she said, cutting him off.

She turned out of the room before Harry could respond.

The following morning, Harry got dressed in a state of nervous agitation.

From his closet, he removed a grey, long-sleeve under-armor shirt and a pair of black shorts. The shirt clung to Harry's skin, showing his chest, broad shoulders, and abs. Harry sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his trainers.

Ginny was still asleep.

Harry sat quietly on the bed for a moment, listening to Ginny's breathing. He thought about what he might tell Hermione.

What did she want to hear? What did she need to say to him? Would she...would she forgive him for what had happened on her birthday?

Harry hated to admit it, but he felt panicky. After two days of not speaking to his best friend, and then to have her abruptly invite him for a run...well, Harry felt very ill at ease about it. And this was coming from someone who hunted down dark wizards for a living...

Harry sighed and stood up.

He walked down the long bed to Ginny's side.

"Hey," Harry said lowly by her ear. "Gin, I'm leaving."

Ginny mumbled. "Wha?"

"I'm going for a run...with Hermione. I'll be back before noon, all right?"

Ginny opened her eyes briefly.

"Hermione?"

"Yes."

Ginny didn't answer for a moment. "Okay," she finally said, turning onto her other side.

Harry touched her shoulder and then walked swiftly out of the room.

A moment later he was standing on the doorstep of Ron and Hermione's home. The morning light gave everything a slightly

bluish tint. He knocked on the door and quickly wrapped his arms around himself to keep warm.

Hermione emerged a second later, as though she had been waiting just behind the door.

"Hermione," Harry said softly.

"Hi," was her only reply. She closed the door.

Harry briefly took in her appearance. She was wearing black leggings and a navy blue tank top covered by a loose, grey pullover. Her hair was tied in a messy ponytail atop her head.

"H-how are you?" Harry tried.

"Fine. Are you ready?" she asked brusquely.

"Yes."

Hermione held out her hand and Harry hesitantly took it. Her fingers were warm. A moment later he was being whipped through the air, Hermione pressed against his side.

They landed in a heavily wooded park. The sound of a river could be heard in the distance. Otherwise, it was exceptionally still.

Without a word, Hermione stepped away and began stretching. Harry watched her for a moment, vaguely wondering if he should speak. His brain seemed to decide on staying quiet and Harry slowly began stretching himself as he gazed at Hermione from the corner of his eye.

She progressed from touching her toes, to swinging her arms, to rotating her neck. In the soft morning light, she looked angelic. The pullover disguised her slim frame, but Harry could see the lovely outline of her legs.

Hermione had taken up running after graduating from Hogwarts. Harry knew that Hermione did not see herself as an athletic person—she had always thought she would live the sedentary life of a student. But, being on the run from Voldemort had changed that. When Hermione had lived with Ron and George immediately

following graduation, running was one of her few escapes when things became too overwhelming in their flat. She now ran two or three times a week.

Harry finished stretching and watched as Hermione lifted her arms over her head one final time. When it looked like she was done, Harry decided to speak.

"Hermione," he said cautiously, "I just wanted to tell you..."

"Harry," she said, placing her hands on her hips and looking down at the ground. "Let's just run."

He stared at her.

"Okay," he said, resigned.

Hermione was not going to speak to him until she was ready.

Thus, they took off running.

The pathway was shaded by trees that tangled into each other, creating an arch over the path. Harry looked to his right and saw the River Isis. It was the branch of the Thames that ran through Oxford University. The school was still out of session and tourist season was winding down. Thus, the whole area was nearly deserted. In the distance, Harry could hear the hum of a leaf blower and a siren coming from the town.

Hermione kept her eyes fixed on the path. Her face was tight, though she seemed to relax slightly as they both found their stride. Harry slowed down so as to stay by her side, letting his footfalls mirror hers.

After running for nearly twenty minutes without talking, Harry was beginning to feel anxious. The morning haze had dissipated in the sunlight and he was beginning to sweat. She had still not looked at him. She barely made a sound, in fact, just the light puff of her breathing.

Still, he kept by Hermione's side, waiting for her to speak.

As they turned around a bend in the trail, the university came into view. Straight ahead, there was a botanical garden and a distant tower. Despite the atmosphere, Harry nearly smiled looking at it. If he squinted, he could almost imagine it was Hogwarts with its turrets and cold stone. Perhaps this was the closest Muggles could get to Hogwarts—and indeed, Oxford did have a certain magic about it. A magic that only comes when something is well over a thousand years old...

"You see that tower over there?" Hermione said at last.

"Yes," Harry replied quickly.

"That's Magdalen College. Let's race there, okay?"

Harry glanced at her, upset she still refused to look at him. He decided to try a different tack.

"All right, but you know I'm faster than you," he said casually.

She finally cracked a smile. "No you're not."

"Hermione, c'mon."

"You're not," she repeated. "I'm just as fast as you."

"You're not, but fine."

Hermione might have rolled her eyes, but he couldn't tell.

"On the count of three, okay?" she said.

"Right," Harry replied, preparing himself.

"One—two—THREE!" she cried.

And they were off.

Harry and Hermione each ran at their full strength, their feet kicking up the pebbles on the path. Harry could not stop smiling as he ran alongside Hermione—his whole body felt lighter knowing they could at least enjoy a friendly race.

For about fifty yards they were neck and neck, but then Harry began to pull away. Vaguely satisfied, he decided to slow down a bit so that she could keep up.

"Oh, fuck you!" Harry heard Hermione laugh out from behind him. "Don't you dare slow down for me!"

Harry laughed and ran at full strength again.

The tower was fast approaching and Harry surged ahead. At last, Harry reached the outer wall and touched the stone. He spun around, breathing hard. Hermione was a few yards behind, her cheeks red with exertion.

Yet, she smiled at him as she approached. She touched the wall as well, collapsing against it and placing her hands on her knees.

Harry put his own hands on his hips. "Told you," he panted.

"Damn chivalrous bastard you are," Hermione breathed. "I used to be better..."

Harry laughed. "You're good...I'm just better."

Hermione glared at him for a moment. "Well, excuse me. It's not in my job description to work out like it is in yours. I'm not paid to exercise."

Harry simply smiled. He turned and spied a bench underneath an alcove of trees near the path. It faced the river. Looking back at Hermione, he made a decision.

"Let's go sit down over there. We should rest a bit," Harry suggested, pointing towards the bench.

Hermione nodded and Harry held out his hand. She did not take it.

A moment later, Harry and Hermione seated themselves on the bench. Both became quiet, their eyes on the river as their breathing slowed.

The river did not have a natural bank, but more of a walkway of stone. There were a few long, skinny boats moored along the wall,

sloshing in the current. It was late morning now and a few Muggles were strolling and jogging along the bank.

Hermione sighed. Unzipping her pullover, she slipped it off her small frame. Now she was simply wearing a tank top with her leggings. Harry tried to ignore the newly exposed skin, but found himself staring a bit.

Then, Harry noticed something.

Cradled in the slope of her neck was his necklace. The wing'd victory necklace. She was still wearing it. This, more than anything, calmed Harry.

She was not angry enough with him to stop wearing his necklace...

"Have you ever been to Oxford?" Hermione asked suddenly.

"Uh, yes," Harry said, dragging his eyes back to the river. "Once or twice. There are a few wizard families in the area—I think one of them actually teaches here. I came for an Auror assignment once...I didn't know about this running path, though. It's very nice. I can see why we came here."

Hermione stared at the water. "I didn't bring you here for the running path."

"Oh?" Harry replied as casually as possible.

"No," Hermione said softly. She was quiet for a long moment. "Did I...did I ever tell you I wanted to come here as a child?"

"To Oxford?"

"Yes," she replied slowly. "When I was seven or eight, I was told Oxford was the best university in the country and I decided, then and there, that it would be only place I would go." Hermione laughed. "I was going to study literature and political philosophy. I even knew what those subjects were back then. I was going to play field hockey and have lots of friends and get accepted to graduate school. It would have been....well, lovely."

Harry glanced at Hermione. It was the first time he was hearing this.

"But then," Hermione said, digging the toe of her trainer into the ground, "well then...I got my Hogwarts letter."

She sighed.

"And once I got it...there was really no question in my mind that I would go to Hogwarts. It explained the unusual things I had been doing for years," she said, her voice becoming softer. "I had also thought...at the time...that it explained why I had no friends. I had thought, if I go to this place—Hogwarts—I will finally be around people like me. I would be happy. And I would learn things I had never dreamed possible. Oxford and all my previous ambitions sort of...flew out the window when that Hogwarts letter flew in. And I didn't look back for eight years..."

"Eight years?" Harry repeated.

"Yes," Hermione said, smiling slightly. "I've never regretted going to Hogwarts...especially after I met you and Ron. I had this eight-year love affair with magic. But...I did regret it all once. I regretted, to some degree, that my ten-year-old dreams were not going to happen. Do you know when I regretted it?"

Harry shook his head.

"It was at my Hogwarts graduation ceremony."

Harry's brow furrowed. "How do you mean?"

He didn't remember Hermione being anything but incandescently happy that day. Harry and Ron had attended, of course, to see Hermione, Ginny and Luna graduate. Hermione had been the class speaker. She was noted in the program for being the most accomplished student at Hogwarts since Albus Dumbledore...

"It was on the stage, right after I gave my speech," Hermione said, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. "I was watching the other students receive their diplomas. They were all smiling, bursting with enthusiasm and hopes and all that. But, in that moment, I felt...exceptionally old."

"Old?"

"Yes," Hermione continued. "You forget that I was a year older than all the other students there. Sure it was only by a year, but sometimes a year can make all the difference, you know? When you're eighteen and surrounded by seventeen-year-olds, life can be a little...isolating. That's how I felt most of my seventh year: isolated. I didn't have you and Ron. I didn't have any of my former classmates. It was difficult at times."

Harry watched her, understanding. He wanted to reach out and touch her, but she seemed lost in thought.

"Besides," she said, smiling softly, "after the year we spent on the run, everything about Hogwarts seemed less...important. Less vital."

Harry emitted an artificial cry of indignation. "Hermione! What are you saying? School not important?"

She simply smiled. "I know...I guess I sorted out my priorities after all, didn't I? My heart just wasn't in it that last year at Hogwarts. I was merely studying out of habit, not desire. I felt adrift and, frankly, a little lost..."

This time Harry reached out and let his hand cover hers. She stared at his hand for a moment before she slipped hers out.

"Anyway," Hermione said, "it was on that stage that, for the first time in eight years, I thought about what my life would have been had I never learned I was a witch. And I thought it might have been okay...Perhaps I would have been on my way to Oxford and then onto some notable job or some notable graduate program. And that...would have been nice." She sighed. "The Muggle world certainly has more opportunities for post-secondary education anyway..."

Harry nodded absently. There wasn't a huge demand in the wizarding world for tertiary schooling. Most wizards entered an apprentice program for their chosen career. There were only two wizarding universities in the world, one in France and one in the United States.

Hermione didn't say anything for a long moment. Harry followed her eyes to the water, where a young man was pushing a boat down the channel with a pole.

"You're probably wondering why I'm telling you this," Hermione said, staring intently as the boat passed. "I don't have a good answer...other than the fact that unmet expectations seem to be a constant in my life. Or not so much 'unmet' as that things don't go the way I expect them to...do you understand?"

"Vaguely."

Hermione finally turned to face him. She looked at him seriously, but her eyes were soft.

"Harry," she said. "I'm so sorry I avoided you this week. I was told you came by my office a few times. I just...I just wasn't ready to see you. I needed time to think, to put my thoughts in order. Can you forgive me?"

"Of course," Harry found himself answering even before she had finished.

All of his anxieties and resentments from the past three days seemed to fade as he gazed into Hermione's eyes. She hadn't meant to hurt him.

Harry understood that about her. Sometimes Hermione simply needed time to think on her own. It was an aspect of her personality that hadn't changed in the twenty-six years he'd known her.

"Good," Hermione sighed in relief. "I was worried you were upset with me..."

Harry smiled reassuringly. He thought briefly of touching her hand again.

"But, Harry," Hermione continued, sending him an anxious glance, "we have to talk about what happened—about what happened on my birthday. We both know it was...wrong. We could pass off one kiss as a chance, but a second kiss is a pattern. A third would be..."

Wonderful? Harry thought before he could stop himself. "Habit?" he suggested instead.

Hermione smiled slightly. "Yes. Habit." She paused. "So I need to ask you an important question—a question I really need you to answer honestly. I want us to be completely honest with each other, starting now. Promise?"

"Yes," Harry said, nervous again.

She took in a shaky breath.

"Harry...are you and Ginny having any...problems that might have caused you to act out with me?"

Harry's brow furrowed, surprised by the question. He had not expected Hermione to ask about the condition of his marriage...but perhaps that was a logical question.

"Uh, no," Harry answered honestly. "Things have been normal between us. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Are you sure?"

Harry wracked his mind. Sure, there was the fight over the Prophet's treatment of Hermione. Sure, he had thought of Hermione while having sex with Ginny. Then there was the fact that Harry knew the best kiss of his life had been with his best friend and not his wife... But, in essentials, things were fine. He and Ginny were still behaving normally.

"Yes," Harry replied. "I'm sure."

She sighed and turned to look at the river.

"Why do you ask?" said Harry curiously. Then, it hit him. "Are you—are you and Ron having problems?"

Hermione, who had been staring at the water, let her head drop between her shoulders. She took a very long time to answer. When she did speak, she raised her head but continued to stare at river.

"I don't know," she said softly. "You know better than just about anyone that things between Ron and I can get pretty nasty...But even knowing that, things have been different recently."

"Why?"

Hermione shrugged. "I think it partially has to do with Rose's leaving. You know that Rose is a daddy's girl. Ron just adores her. I mean, he loves Hugo just as much, but Ron and Rose have some bond that I've never been able to have with her. I think...I think losing her has hit Ron pretty hard."

Harry nodded. Ron would never admit it to Harry, but Harry had also noticed a certain sullenness within his best friend whenever the conversation turned to Rose. Ron missed his daughter dearly.

Hermione continued. "The other thing is that Ron doesn't like the idea of me becoming Deputy Director of Magical Law Enforcement. It's not because he doesn't want me to succeed," she said quickly, noticing Harry's expression. "He just thinks now isn't the time. He thinks I'm already over-worked and that if I was made Deputy, it would only be a matter of time before I'm appointed John's successor. Then, I would have even less time for him and Hugo. He just worries about what it will do to the family...which is a completely legitimate concern..."

Hermione trailed off. She fiddled with the zipper of her pullover.

Harry didn't say anything. She was being incredibly forthright with him, and it didn't feel like she was done.

"I've had to infer all this, mind you," Hermione said, her voice shaking. "Ron won't come out and tell me what he thinks. I know he doesn't want to hold me back from what I want. But, the fact that he can't tell me his concerns...well, that worries me too."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked quietly.

She glanced at him and then sighed. "You'll think this a bit strange. Ron and I still fight, but these days we fight less and less. In fact, most of our fights happen in front of company, almost like we're putting on a show. But when we're alone in the house, it's as if

neither of us has the energy to carry on as we used to. And I worry because, as contrary as it sounds, fighting used to be how Ron and I confronted things, major things. Our hopes, worries, expectations. Now, we just talk about errands we need to run, the children's activities, what's for dinner and the like...completely meaningless, trivial things." She rubbed her temple. "I'm afraid we have a problem, but we're both too tired to figure it out."

Harry stared at her, shaken by this revelation. And it wasn't because it sounded like Hermione and Ron had problems—it was because it sounded so similar to his marriage with Ginny.

He and Ginny were not known to bicker constantly. But they never truly talked to each other either. At least not about the things Hermione had described—hopes, ideas, fears. Work, the children, and errands dominated their conversations as well. But wasn't that normal? That's what married couples do. Why was Hermione talking like there was something wrong with that? Like something more should be expected?

Hermione glanced at him.

"Can I ask another question?"

Harry tore his mind away from his thoughts. "Sure."

"I'm sorry... it's sort of a personal question," she said, embarrassed. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to..."

Harry looked at her expectantly.

"Do you-Do you mind my asking when was the last time you and Ginny had...sex?"

Harry laughed awkwardly, again startled by her question.

"The last time?" he repeated.

"Yes."

Harry searched his mind and then felt his stomach drop. The last time he and Ginny had had sex was the day he first kissed

Hermione. The night he had pictured Hermione while he made love to his wife.

"It...uh, it was about two and half weeks ago," Harry stammered, looking away from her.

Hermione considered this for a moment.

"How often do you have sex?" she asked bluntly.

Harry shrugged. "It's been less often recently. But on average, I would say once or twice a week. I mean, we have weird sleep schedules. She usually goes to bed later than me and I wake up a lot earlier."

Hermione nodded, seemingly satisfied.

They both passed into silence, watching a Muggle couple jog past their bench. Hermione's silence peaked Harry's interest, however. He wasn't entirely sure why he wanted to know the answer to this question.

"Can I ask when you and Ron...last had sex?" Harry said, watching Hermione from the corner of his eye.

Hermione glanced at him, as though judging whether he was serious. For a moment, Harry thought she wouldn't answer, which somehow sent a flicker of anger through him. Hadn't she asked for honesty in this conversation?

Finally, she sighed. "You...promise not to judge me?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "No. Why would I do that?"

"Just...never mind," she said, looking down at her feet. "The last time Ron and I had sex was on his birthday."

Harry stared. Ron's birthday was March 1st. They hadn't had sex in over six months.

"Oh," was all Harry could say.

"I mean, we have weird sleep schedules too!" Hermione said quickly. "I'm always at the office by seven, so that means I go to bed by eleven. Ron can go into work whenever he pleases, so he usually sleeps in and stays up late. Plus, it's been the summer until about now...so with the kids home, there are less opportunities, you know?"

"Right."

As Harry remained silent, Hermione grew increasingly anxious.

"I knew you'd judge me," Hermione said sarcastically, smiling slightly. "Men are always up in arms when they think they deserve sex..."

"No," Harry protested. "I didn't say anything, did I?"

Hermione still looked distressed.

Harry sighed, looking at her seriously. "Hermione—I mean, you shouldn't feel bad or judged just because you haven't done it in a while. Sex is supposed to be...something you want to do, right?" Harry said lamely. "Do...do you not want to do it?" he couldn't help asking.

Hermione shrugged. "Yeah, sure. I mean, sex is fine."

"Fine?" Harry repeated, slightly affronted for all mankind.

Hermione smiled slightly. "Okay, it can be really fine. Even great occasionally."

Harry considered her for a moment. It was not exactly a glowing review of sex.

"It doesn't sound like you care for it that much," Harry said offhandedly. "Do you not have the desire or something...?"

She cut him off, indignant. "Hey! I have the desire. I do. I mean...c'mon, I have a multi-setting showerhead. I have the desire."

Harry's brain slipped into a catatonic state.

"What?" he asked numbly.

Hermione gave him a scathing look. "What? You thought I didn't masturbate?"

Harry jumped off the bench.

"Hermione Granger!" he shouted, running both hands through his hair.

Harry desperately tried to stop them, but they came anyway.

The images. The images. Hermione. In a shower. Masturbating. Suds. Oh fuck's sake.

"What?" Hermione said, laughing now. "You asked!"

"And this is what you tell me! That, that you're some serial masturbator?"

"Serial? Please."

"Well, how often then?" Harry demanded, not sure why he was so worked up about it. He tried to focus on her face but those glorious images...they were bubbling up in the back of his mind.

Oh, God. Am I really getting turned on right now? Harry thought frantically. How fucking old am I? Thirteen?

He looked down at himself.

And I'm wearing running shorts. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Harry turned towards the river.

Dolores Umbridge eating ice cream. Dolores Umbridge eating ice cream.

Hermione had not answered his question. She was looking at him, perplexed.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine!" Harry said, still not facing her. He took a few quick breaths. "Are you going to answer my question?" he asked despite himself.

"You're asking how often I...masturbate?"

"Yes," Harry said tightly.

"Oh," Hermione said, perplexed. "I don't know. Maybe two or three times a week, when I'm not in a rush in the morning."

"Ah," Harry said, closing his eyes.

Hermione laughed awkwardly. "Sorry if that's alarming. Maybe I should have realized... But, certainly you must have assumed? Many women do..."

Harry nodded, his eyes still closed as he batted away the sudsy visions pressing against his optic nerve. It wasn't the fact that women masturbated that bothered Harry. It was that one particular woman masturbated. Harry didn't want to admit it, but he knew he would probably end up thinking of Hermione doing just that tonight...

Fuck.

Harry, still feeling not quite presentable, kept his arms tucked around him, his knees slightly bent. In his state, he did not hear Hermione approach him until her hand lightly touched his shoulder.

Harry spun around. Hermione was smiling.

"Look," she said calmly, "the reason I brought it up was because I obviously need to fix some things with Ron. And I know that, right now, the absolute worst thing I could do would be to continue indulging this...strange inclination that seems to have overtaken us recently." She looked down. "I won't pretend that kissing you wasn't...wonderful. But, I think we should promise each other that it will absolutely never happen again. Is that all right?"

Harry understood everything she said, but only one phrase stuck out in his foggy mind. She thought kissing him was 'wonderful.'

With her face so close to his, and his own face still warm from the previous topic, Harry couldn't help but be honest with her. That's what she had requested from this conversation, after all.

"I thought...kissing you was wonderful too," he said in a rush.

Hermione briefly glanced at him. Her cheeks seemed to color. She took a few steps back.

"Well, thank you," she said lightly. "I'm glad we agree. Just because we enjoyed it, though, doesn't mean we should ever, ever do it again. Ever."

Harry agreed quickly. "Right. It's just wrong. Completely wrong."

"Completely."

They stared at each other for a moment before Hermione cleared her throat.

"Should we...keep walking then?" she asked, taking a few steps down the path. "There's more to show you..."

Harry nodded still staring at her as she turned away.

In that moment, Harry realized there was a choice. He could keep silent right now and things would hopefully return to normal between them. They would perhaps spend another hour wandering the campus before they returned for lunch. They would see each other at work and pretend that nothing had happened between them, that they were simply two great friends with no awkward history of unplanned snogging sessions.

Or, he could speak.

As Harry watched Hermione walk slowly down the path, he realized what was wrong with this conversation. Hermione was too focused on the outside factors that had caused their most recent kiss: her problems with Ron, Rose's leaving, stress at work. Harry knew these things were important, but wasn't there something to be said about the internal factors? The fact that it was not just two people kissing, but that it was them? Harry and Hermione? Two best friends who had suddenly found themselves kissing each other?

Was something like that entirely explainable by marriage problems?

Harry stared at Hermione a moment longer before he decided. If he didn't ask now, he would never have another chance.

"Are you attracted to me, Hermione?"

Hermione spun at the sound of his voice. She stared at him, as though frightened. After a long moment, she spoke.

"Yes," she said shakily.

Harry blinked, his chest tightening with pleasure.

"Are you attracted to me?" Hermione returned quietly.

"Yes."

Hermione remained silent, kicking the dirt with her feet. Yet, Harry was sure he saw her cheeks color again.

"And why is that?" Hermione asked, no meeting his intense stare.

"Well," said Harry, taking a few steps towards her, "because you are beautiful, if we're being honest."

Hermione let out an unintentional laugh, still looking at the ground. "Well, you're very handsome."

"If you say so," Harry said, vainly trying to read her expression.

"Shut up, Harry," Hermione said gently. "You're handsome. You're over six feet tall. You're still incredibly fit from all your training. The grey hair on your temples only makes you look more...distinguished. You've become more handsome as we've gotten older. It's not the same for women."

"I don't know what you mean," Harry said, genuinely confused. "You've always been beautiful. I don't see any change in you."

Hermione did not respond. Her hands were twisting inside her jacket.

"It's all right, isn't it?" Hermione whispered after a moment. "It's all right that we find each other attractive?"

"Yes," Harry said, reassuring himself as well as her. "It's all right. It doesn't mean anything beyond the fact that we've both held up well for our age. You more than me, of course."

Hermione rolled her eyes, smiling despite her reservations. "I'll take the compliment only because I know I don't hold a candle to Ginny."

Harry's grin faltered. The injection of his wife into the conversation diffused the warm glow Harry had been enjoying since learning Hermione was attracted to him.

Hermione took Harry's silence for assent.

"She is gorgeous," Hermione said casually, returning her gaze to the path.

"She is," Harry agreed slowly. "I kind of picked up on that during her Quidditch matches. The Harpies have a very dedicated male fan base..."

Hermione nodded, smiling. "Well, I'm sure you picked up on that before her Quidditch days, as well."

Harry shrugged. "I suppose I did."

They became silent again.

"Why did you ask?" Hermione said suddenly, an edge in her voice. "What does it matter if we find each other attractive?"

"Well, shouldn't it matter?" Harry said, slightly defensive. "You seem to want to blame everything on your issues. Shouldn't it count for something that we might have kissed because we are attracted to each other?"

"No!" Hermione sputtered. "Part of marriage is self-control. I've been attracted to people now and again, but I don't go around kissing them because I am married!"

"Yeah, but I'm not some guy you see passing on the street."

"What are you getting at?" Hermione demanded, crossing her arms in front of her.

Harry glared at her for a moment. Then, he sighed, passing a hand through his hair. "I don't know, Hermione," he said, resigned. "I just...I'm sorry. You might have kissed me because of what's happening with you and Ron. I just kissed you because I wanted to...which is a shit reason to do anything, I suppose."

Hermione stared at him, her eyes wide. Neither of them spoke for a moment, until Hermione sighed and crossed the space between them.

She smiled slightly as she reached down and took his hand.

"Hey," she said gently, "no matter our reasons, we both fucked up, right? It doesn't matter as long as we don't do it again. We've hurt Ginny and Ron and that's what's important here, okay?"

Harry nodded, not meeting her eyes.

"So, we agree?" Hermione asked, squeezing his hand. "No more snogging. Period."

"Right," Harry said, returning her reassuring smile. His next words seemed to push against his lips without his consent. "It won't be easy though."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Not kissing you. It won't be easy," Harry admitted. He had a feeling he was taking this too far.

Hermione blushed scarlet and released his hand. "Well...uh..." She cleared her throat. "Well, don't worry...I'll be there. I'll make sure you don't...don't kiss me again."

"I guess that's true," Harry laughed awkwardly.

Hermione laughed as well, returning her hands to her pockets and kicking the dirt with her feet. "Er, so do you want to walk around?" she asked again.

"Yeah, sure."

Harry and Hermione continued their walk along the river.

More boats were floating in the channel now. They were full of tourists being shunted down the river by young drivers with long, skinny oars. As noon approached, the weather became unseasonably warm. Hermione tied her jumper around her waist.

"You're still wearing my necklace," Harry noted nonchalantly as they rounded a bend in the river.

Hermione looked down at the delicate chain and briefly touched it with her hand.

"Well, I do like it," she said honestly. "I thought about taking it off to go running, but then I just put a Locking Spell on it and an Impervious Charm so it won't get rusty when it gets wet. Only I can take it off."

Harry nodded, pleased. He liked seeing his necklace tucked in the graceful arc of her neck.

"This place is beautiful, isn't it?" Hermione said, gazing off at another college of grey stone.

"It is," Harry agreed. "It's almost like Hogwarts."

Hermione smiled. "I guess I can see that."

She looped her arm through his as she directed him towards a low bridge on their right. They crossed it and began walking in the direction they had come.

"Do you miss it?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Hogwarts?" Harry answered softly. "Yeah, I guess I do." Then, he shrugged. "I'll be going up in April for recruitment week, in any case."

Hermione laughed. "Couldn't you send someone else? You know everyone hates recruitment week when you come for the Auror

Department. No one shows up to our meetings. They all just want to see Harry Potter."

Harry laughed.

"Hey, I don't go every year," he said, taking mock offense. "Besides, it's not like the AD can accept all its applicants. I'm really just going so I can bother James and Albus."

"Of course," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "Well, maybe I'll go too, then. Rose should know she's not entirely free of me yet!"

Harry chuckled.

They walked in silence for a while, Hermione's hand securely tucked into the crook of Harry's arm. There were less people on this side of the river.

Harry found himself glancing at Hermione quite often. She seemed content, her eyes darting around to take in the scenery. Her gorgeous lips were pulled into a soft smile.

Harry was just going to mentally rhapsodize on the beauty of her hair when Hermione removed her hand and slid it down Harry's arm. She entwined her fingers with his.

She gave him a playful grin.

"You see that boat mooring over there?" she asked.

Harry looked ahead. Sure enough, about a hundred yards away there was a small overhang on the path that led down to several boats.

"Yeah," Harry replied.

"Race you!" Hermione shouted, whipping her hand out of his and sprinting down the path.

"Hey!" Harry laughed. "Not fair, Hermione!"

Hermione's laughter floated back to him. She was already far ahead, but Harry gave chase, pushing himself beyond his usual pace. Soon

they were neck and neck. In the final few yards, Harry pulled ahead of Hermione and touched the mooring.

"Ha ha!" Harry cried triumphant as he jogged back to Hermione, who had collapsed against the mooring. "Don't try and pull that on me, Hermione. I'll just win anyway."

"Yeah, yeah," Hermione said, getting to her feet. There was a dangerous glint in her eye. "You win again, Harry Potter."

Harry, momentarily entranced by the seductive spark in her eyes (to him anyway), failed to realize what Hermione was doing. A second later, she had shoved him hard with her shoulder and he went stumbling into the river.

The water was frigid.

"Ahh!" Harry shouted, bobbing to the surface. "What the fuck, Hermione! It's September! You can't throw people into the Thames in September!"

Hermione was laughing uproariously, her hands on her knees. The surface of the water was covered with autumn leaves that stuck to Harry's skin. Fortunately, the water was not very deep and Harry's toes easily skimmed the bottom.

Hermione was leaning against the mooring now, clutching her stomach.

"I'm sorry!" she cried, swiping at her eyes. "You were so smug, how could I not!"

She devolved into giggles again.

Harry, teeth chattering now, found himself smiling at the sight of her. He loved it when Hermione laughed—that wondrous, unguarded laughter he so rarely heard from her. But that didn't mean he wasn't going to have his revenge...

"Come on, Hermione," Harry said, swimming towards the bank. "Help me out of here. It's freezing."

Hermione watched him suspiciously. "Why don't you just use the deck right there," Hermione suggested, pointing to her right. "That'll be easier."

"No. I want your help."

"Oh no," Hermione said, smiling. "I know what you're doing..."

"Come here, Hermione," Harry said innocently. He held out his hand.

Hermione laughed again, edging away from the bank.

"Ha ha, Harry. You think I don't know that trick?"

He smiled devilishly at her. "Well, here's my trick."

Harry raised his hand out of the water.

"Accio necklace!" he shouted. Hermione might have placed a Locking Spell and Impervious Charm on her necklace, but she had not made it un-Summonable...

Dragged by the necklace, Hermione's feet were swept out from under her as she flew towards Harry. She screamed as she hit the water.

"Oh, shit! Oh, fuck! It's cold!" she yelped. "You little...!"

She blindly reached out towards him, thrashing as much water as she could.

Harry had no trouble pinning her arms against his chest, one hand looping around her back. He chuckled as she continued to thrash against him. At least it was slightly warmer this way...

After a moment, Hermione quieted. "All right," she said, her teeth chattering as well. "I'm sorry I did that. Should have realized I had this coming..."

"Mmmhm," Harry mumbled, satisfied.

They became silent, the water lapping against their bodies the only sound. Soon, even that faded. They were very still as they gazed at one another.

Harry swallowed. The feeling of her wrapped around him—the only barrier between them a few layers of wet clothing—was intoxicating.

"See, right now," Harry said, his voice low, "I really want to kiss you."

Hermione's eyes fluttered down to his lips.

"Well, that's just tough luck, isn't it?" she said slowly whilst simultaneously pressing herself against him.

"I guess so," Harry said, his heart thundering as he felt Hermione lock her legs around his waist. He let go of her arms. She didn't push him away.

Carefully, Harry trailed his hands down to her waist.

"You'll just have to live with it," Hermione said alluringly, locking her arms behind his neck.

Harry was painfully aware that her breasts were pressed against his chest.

She bit her bottom lip as she gazed at him.

Was she trying to kill him?

Harry very nearly groaned aloud, but he remained silent.

Oh, how entrancing she was! Despite their conversation, he desperately wanted her to give him some sign that he could kiss her again. He wanted to feel her wet body against his, pressed even more tightly than it was now. He wanted to feel her lips moving against his, her lips on his throat, her lips moving lower...

To feel transcendence one more time...

"Hey!" someone shouted from the bank. "What are you two doing?"

Harry and Hermione turned sharply and saw a portly, middle-aged man looking on disapprovingly from the shore. He seemed to be some sort of groundskeeper.

"You get out of there now!" the man yelled. "The water's not for swimming!"

Before Harry could respond, Hermione giggled and dragged him underwater by the neck. She wrapped her legs even more tightly around him and pressed herself to his chest.

A moment later, Harry was swirling through the icy air. They had disappeared.

Harry gasped. A splashing sound met his ears, then the sound of Hermione's laughter.

"Wow!" Hermione said. "I'm glad that worked! I've never apparated underwater before."

Harry rubbed his eyelids and Hermione came into focus behind the water droplets on his glasses. They were standing on the front porch of Hermione's home.

"That was insane," Harry laughed disbelievingly. "That man is going to think we drowned."

Hermione shrugged. "Or that we're really good swimmers. I can hold my breath for a minute, you know."

"Can you?" Harry said, impressed. His feet were squelching inside his trainers.

Just then, the front door swung open. Ron appeared, bemused at the sight on the doorstep.

"What happened to you two?" he asked.

Harry chuckled again. "She threw me in the Thames."

He stared at them for a moment, as though they were crazy.

"Ew."

Harry and Hermione laughed. Together, the three of them stepped into the house.

Harry checked for his wand and, gratefully, still found it tucked up his sleeve. He removed it now and waved it over himself. He was instantly dry.

"So, did you guys have a nice run/swim?" Ron asked sarcastically as Harry and Hermione moved into the foyer.

Harry smile faltered slightly, remembering the compromising position he and Hermione had just been in. "Yeah, guess you could say so..."

Hermione nodded absently, her eyes on the stairs. "I think I'll take a quick shower," she said, untying her jumper from around her waist. "I'll be down a few minutes."

Harry and Ron watched as Hermione climbed the stairs.

"Eugh," Ron said, his nostrils flaring. "You really do smell, mate."

Harry laughed. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. It's not exactly the cleanest part of the river."

"What part was it?"

"We went to Oxford," Harry explained.

"Oh. Why? What's there?"

"Well, a university," Harry said simply. Harry realized that Ron had probably never heard about Hermione's connection to the school. He felt sure that he was the first person to hear Hermione's thoughts on Oxford. "They have a nice running path along the river."

"Oh, okay. Well, I was making breakfast. You want any?" Ron asked, moving towards the kitchen.

"Sure," Harry said, realizing he was hungry for the first time.

Hermione came down the stairs ten minutes later, her damp hair resting on her shoulders. The necklace still hung around her neck.

She sighed as she sat down in one of the kitchen chairs. "I'm absolutely knackered now," she said, pulling out her wand and lazily flicking it towards the icebox.

A flask of orange juice came soaring towards her hand, followed quickly by a cup.

Ron, who had been standing by the toaster with Harry, looked up as Hermione spoke. He suddenly smiled.

"Well, maybe this will get you excited," Ron said, moving towards the small desk in the corner of the kitchen.

Harry and Hermione looked at him curiously.

Ron rifled through the papers in the drawer before he found what he was looking for. "Consider it a late birthday gift," Ron said simply, revealing a white envelope.

Harry watched with a strange feeling of unease as Hermione stood up and walked towards Ron.

She took the envelope and pulled out two rectangular slips of paper with colorful writing.

"Oh, Ron!" Hermione cried ecstatically. She quickly embraced her husband, throwing her arms around his neck. "I can't believe it! Thank you!"

Harry, his heart his throat, asked, "What is it?"

Ron turned and looked at Harry. "I got her tickets to some show she's been wanting to see."

"Not just any show!" Hermione corrected him, grinning widely. "It's an opera and," she glanced down at the tickets, "it's for opening night! How wonderful! This will be amazing!"

"An opera?" Harry said, confused. "I didn't know you liked opera?"

"I don't particularly," Hermione said quickly. "My parents recently got into it and have been encouraging me to go. I mentioned it to Ron, so I guess now we're going!"

Ron nodded smugly. "I even had to use a telly-phone to get those tickets."

Hermione smiled at Ron, briefly rubbing his arm. "Well then, that is a big accomplishment."

"So-so you're going to sit through this thing too, Ron?" Harry asked.

Ron sighed, passing a hand through his hair. "I guess so."

Hermione laughed. "Well, it's certainly a better gift than last year's. A girl can only do with so much perfume. Thank you, Ron."

Ron shrugged, though he was smiling.

As Harry watched them, he felt his stomach turn over. He felt as though he were watching something incredibly private. His brief sojourn at Oxford felt like a dream, and watching Hermione with Ron was like rediscovering reality.

Underneath his discomfort, seeing his best friends together caused another emotion. Something very much like envy...

"Uh, I'm going to go," Harry said abruptly, trying to mask his agitation. "I should probably go help Ginny with lunch."

Ron nodded, but Hermione looked at him curiously.

"I'll see you both later," Harry said, walking out of the kitchen as casually as possible.

Once he was out of the room, Harry strode quickly into the foyer. His hand had just touched the front door when he heard Hermione's voice.

"Harry!" she called. He turned and watched as Hermione came to stop before him. The tickets were still clutched in her hand. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he lied quickly.

"Oh, okay," she said, still looking concerned. "I...I hope things are all right...between us?"

"Of course," Harry said, staring at a spot beyond her shoulder. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"Right," Hermione said slowly.

"Right, well enjoy your opera..."

Hermione laughed. "It's not until December."

"Oh," Harry said lamely.

Hermione continued to stare at him strangely. After a moment, she reached down and took his hand.

"Thanks for running with me," she said. "I'm glad we could talk."

Harry could only nod in response.

Hermione smiled softly. "Well, I'll see you later then?"

"Right," Harry said again, not meeting her eyes.

He reached for the doorknob and swung the door open. Hermione took a few steps back, waved at him, and proceeded towards the kitchen.

Harry watched her go.

"So, do you want eggs?" Harry heard Ron ask Hermione from the distant kitchen.

Harry sighed and closed the door behind himself.

A darker part of Harry wanted to revel in the fact that he knew Hermione and Ron had marriage problems, that they had not slept together in months, that she found him, Harry, attractive, and that kissing him was wonderful.

But, all that counted for nothing when Ron had the opera tickets and could offer her eggs in the morning. It counted for nothing when Ron was her husband.

Chapter 12: The Throes

Harry looked dubiously at the receiver in his hand.

I shouldn't do this. This is ridiculous.

The dial tone's doleful echo reverberated in his empty study.

Sighing, Harry replaced the receiver and rubbed his temples. He then folded his arms and laid his head on top, staring sideways at the phone.

After another moment, Harry grabbed the receiver and dialed the number he had memorized in the last ten minutes of failed attempts.

The phone rang at the other end.

Two rings.

Three rings.

Harry thought better of it and began to replace the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Dudley!" Harry stammered. "Uh, hi. It's Harry."

"Harry?" Dudley responded, momentarily confused. "Oh, hey. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How're you? How're the kids?"

"Oh, they're fine...Shannon's getting Violet from football practice." He paused. "Uh, what can I do for you?"

Harry laughed internally. He already regretted calling. He and Dudley were on decidedly "Christmas-card" terms and this would just add a new level of awkwardness to the relationship.

"Well, I have sort of an odd request..." Harry said tightly. "Do you...do you happen to own a credit card?"

Silence.

"What?" Dudley replied. Harry could hear the surprise on the other end of the line. "Of course. Why?"

"Erm, well you see...I'm buying tickets to the London Opera and the woman on the phone said I needed something called a credit card. They don't accept cash through the mail anymore... and the ticket office doesn't sell tickets this far in advance. And well, needless to say, I don't have a credit card..."

"The London Opera? Why are you going there?"

Harry smiled slightly. He could hear the accusatory tone in Dudley's voice. It was something he got from his father.

"I'm going with some friends," Harry said quickly, not wanting to explain in more detail. "And I was wondering...if you don't mind...if I could borrow your credit card details? I promise I'll pay you back through owl post or perhaps I can just drop by?"

Dudley was silent.

Then, Harry heard the sound of footsteps followed by a shuffling noise.

Finally, Dudley spoke.

"Er, yeah. All right. So long as you pay me back."

Harry hadn't realized he was holding his breath. He released it now.

"Thanks, Dud. Thanks so much."

"Yeah, no problem," Dudley said gruffly. "You ready?"

"Oh, right. Of course!" said Harry, scrambling for a quill and a slip of parchment. "Go ahead."

"Okay—tell the lady the number is: 4142..."

"4142..."

Harry dutifully copied the numbers and the expiration date.

"That's all I need?" Harry questioned, scribbling down a three-digit number he didn't entirely understand.

"Yeah. Just promise you'll rip up that paper when you're done or else you could buy anything online with..." Dudley stopped.

Harry chuckled. "That won't be a problem, Dud. I don't know how to go 'online.'"

Dudley laughed. "Right, of course you don't."

Harry smiled. "Well, it should come out to around 500 pounds...if that's all right?"

Dudley let out a low whistle. "Must be some good seats. That should be fine, though. Those tickets for you and Ginny?"

"Er, yeah...So, would you like me to drop by the house? I'll have to go to the bank to get some Mug—cash. Would tomorrow be all right?"

"Sure. Anytime after six."

"All right. Thanks so much, Dud."

"It's fine. See you tomorrow."

"Right."

Harry hung up the phone. He stared down at the messy line of digits and shook his head.

What is wrong with me? he thought for thousandth time this week.

The question had a ready answer that Harry was hardly ready to admit.

Since their conversation at Oxford, Harry had been giving his best effort to behave normally around Hermione. Over the past week, he passed her in the halls of the Ministry. On Monday, he picked up the children with her. He ate lunch with her on Tuesday. Hermione was still very busy conducting research for the Callahan case, so Harry

did not see her as much as he would have liked, but at least some semblance of normalcy had returned to their interactions.

Yet, from Harry's perspective, Hermione was handling their new no-snogging policy much better than he was.

Every time Hermione touched his arm, or her knee brushed his under the table, something very much like an electric pulse rushed up his spine. Unfortunately, a vivid flash of memory usually followed: him kissing Hermione's neck, Hermione slipping her tongue past his lips, Hermione masturbating in the shower...

Needless to say, such thoughts disrupted Harry's air of friendly nonchalance around her...

He was desperate to shut these thoughts down. He certainly hoped his reaction to Hermione wasn't permanent. He was absolutely sure that he and Hermione could not return to normal until he was able to purge these thoughts from his mind. He wanted to look at Hermione as he used to—as his wonderfully brilliant and wholly amazing best friend. Nothing more, nothing less.

But Wednesday, fucking Wednesday, had shat all over his plans.

It was their weekly dinner. Harry and Ginny were hosting. Harry, Ginny, and Ron had handled most of the cooking, since Hermione would be working late. The theme was Middle Eastern and Ron had found a good recipe for chicken shwarma while Harry had ventured into a Muggle restaurant to pick up an order of baklava. Ginny had prepared the salad and bread. When Hermione arrived at half past seven, the food was nearly ready so she made the drinks. Together with the kids, they sat around the table enjoying their small feast.

Harry got through dinner fine. Since he was sitting between Ron and Hugo, the conversation invariably turned to the Cannon's chances in the upcoming national semi-finals. Harry had been quite content with the discussion, but Hermione kept (rather rudely) imposing herself into his thoughts.

First, she asked him to pass the butter. Then, she excused herself to go to the bathroom. When she sat back down, she smiled at him. Ten minutes later, she smiled at Ron.

What was she playing at? And did she have to look so fucking beautiful while doing it?

It was damned annoying.

After dinner, things got even worse.

Hermione had sent Hugo and Lily upstairs to finish their schoolwork (whether they would actually do so was up for debate). Ginny had then led the way to the lounge at the back of the house. It faced the backyard, which was nearly dark, as the sun had set several minutes ago behind the trees.

After lighting the lamps in the room, Harry had rather resolutely seated himself next to Ginny. Ginny, for her part, had returned to her favorite topic of conversation over the past few days—planning the New Year's Eve Ball at the house—and Harry was determined to listen to her.

She had been talking about caterers when Harry saw Hermione stand up. Hermione walked over to Ron, who had been preparing himself a bourbon at the small bar in the room, and placed her hand on his forearm. She had smiled and whispered something. Ron had shrugged.

For some reason, this bothered Harry tremendously.

Here he was trying to force an interested expression on his face while Ginny talked about caterers, and Hermione was smiling at Ron. Didn't she realize he was doing his best to treat her normally? Why did she have to smile so beautifully in front of him? If she was going to do it, she could at least have the good manners to smile at him...

Harry vaguely realized he was plumbing the depths of irrationality. What did it matter that Hermione asked for the butter? What did it matter if Hermione smiled at her husband?

That fuzzy realization was enough for Harry to forcibly turn his attention away from Hermione and back towards Ginny. And indeed, for the rest of evening, Harry was relatively able to follow his wife's conversation. He had even suggested they open up the formal dining room for the vast array of food the party would require. Many

of the Aurors would not want to dance, Harry reminded Ginny, and having a separate room for the food would free up space.

At some point, Hermione excused herself to check on the children's progress. Ginny left a minute later to use the bathroom.

Harry and Ron were left alone.

"This party is getting pretty out of hand, isn't it?" Ron observed, smirking as he came to sit across from Harry.

Harry shrugged. "It's what she wants, I suppose."

Ron nodded absently, settling back on the cushions. "I guess I would know about that. Hermione won't shut up about this opera thing now. She's always talking about it on the telly-phone with her parents. She's started playing the music around the house. Hugo and I have discussed an intervention," Ron chuckled.

Harry smiled automatically. The opera—yet another sore spot in Harry's mind.

Ron's next words surprised him, however.

"You know," he said slowly, "it might be nice if you and Ginny came along too?"

"What?" Harry said, startled.

Ron grimaced. "Yeah, I know. I wouldn't want to go either, but I don't think I can stand to sit in a stuffy theater for three hours with a bunch of Muggles. If you and Ginny were there, I could probably make it through."

Harry looked at Ron. He seemed serious...even desperate?

"If you didn't want to go, why did you buy the tickets?" Harry asked.

"I didn't. Hermione's mum got them for us," Ron said, surprised by the question.

"But you said you used a telephone to get them."

"Yeah, I called her mum. It's the only telly-phone number I know."

"So you called her mum and asked her to buy the tickets?"

"No. I called her mum and asked her what she thought Hermione might want for her birthday," Ron said. "I usually just get her perfume, but then I saw an unused bottle in her closet, so I figured I'd be wasting money if I bought her another..."

"So, her mum suggested the opera?"

"Yeah," Ron said. He seemed surprised Harry hadn't figured it out. "She said Hermione was getting into opera and it might be nice to go see a live show. So, I asked if she'd buy the tickets and she agreed. I tried to pay her back but she wouldn't let me."

"Oh," Harry said, mulling this over.

"So you have to go, Harry," Ron said, desperation back in his voice. "I've listened to this stuff now. I cannot begin to describe how boring it is. Please, come with me. If you're there at least we can make fun of the costumes together or something."

Harry looked at Ron's pleading expression and smiled. Harry didn't understand it, but he suddenly felt quite elated that he had been invited. Imposing on Ron's birthday gift to Hermione seemed like a wonderful idea...

"Of course we'll go. Can't have you suffering alone."

Ron looked up to the heavens. "Thank you," he sighed.

"What about Ginny, though?" Harry asked.

"What about me?"

The two men turned. Ginny had returned from the bathroom.

"Oh, er..." Ron said lamely, "Harry said you two are coming to the opera with us."

"What?" Ginny said, her face immediately turning sour.

Harry briefly glared at Ron. "It's not like that. Ron was practically begging that we go. He doesn't think he can stand it alone."

"Oh, well that really makes me want to go now," Ginny said sarcastically. "Harry and I didn't force you to buy those tickets, Ron."

Ron shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I, er...I think we should go, Gin," Harry said, panicking. "I mean if Ron really can't stand it..." He cut himself off at Ginny's expression.

Ron sighed. "Look—just come with us, Ginny. Hermione's all excited about it now. I can already tell I'm going to fall asleep at this thing. If you're both there, she may not notice, which means she may not yell at me," he said, smiling ruefully.

"I don't see why Harry and I have to subject ourselves to a night of Muggle theater just because you can't follow-through on a present, Ronald..."

"You get to dress up," Ron mumbled.

Ginny blinked. "Why?"

"God, I don't know," Ron said, exasperated. "Hermione just told me that the men have to wear those penguin costumes..."

"Tuxedos," Harry supplied.

"Right, thanks. And the women wear big, fancy dresses. And apparently you get binoculars. I'm going to bring my Omnioculars, though."

Harry watched Ginny's face. He could read the conflict there: her desire to get dressed up pitted against her resistance to aiding Ron in one of his screw-ups.

The choice was difficult for her. Ginny was considered somewhat of a fashion trendsetter in the wizarding world. She was often featured in *Witch Weekly* and had recently been commissioned to help redesign the Harpies' Quidditch uniforms.

A moment later, however, Ginny rolled her eyes. "Doesn't change the fact that we have to sit through some boring play with a crowd of Muggles. I don't think it's a good idea..."

"Ginny," Ron began, but he was cut short. They could all hear footsteps on the stairs above.

"Shut up," Ron hissed. "Don't tell her about any of this."

A moment later, Hermione entered the room. Her smile faltered as she looked at them.

"What's wrong with you guys?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing. How are the kids coming along?" Ron asked innocently.

Hermione was immediately distracted.

"Ron, we need to talk to Hugo about his math scores. He showed me some of his recent tests—he was hiding them, can you believe that? —and he's just not progressing as he should..."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. When did math ever come in handy at Hogwarts? Unless you're taking Arithmancy..."

Hermione nearly growled. "Ron, this is exactly where he gets it from! How many times have I told you both that math is used in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Muggle Studies, and even blasted Divination."

"All right, all right, Professor," Ron said, taking a hold of Hermione's shoulders and directing her towards the door. "We'll talk to him tomorrow. Right now, shouldn't we be getting him to bed?"

Hermione quieted, though she still seemed upset.

"It is nearly ten," Ginny said as she followed Ron and Hermione out of the room.

The group moved back into the foyer.

Ginny disappeared up the stairs to see to Lily. Harry and Hermione followed Ron more slowly into the kitchen. Ron walked to the table

and waved his wand over the leftover chicken shwarma, magicking it back to his home.

He sighed, satisfied. "That was a good dinner, wasn't it? We'll have to cook that again."

Harry nodded.

Hermione, who had been leaning against the doorjamb, moved towards the staircase.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked quickly.

"I'm getting Hugo..." she replied.

"Wait, I'll go get him. He probably rather see me after the wailing you likely gave him."

Hermione made a disapproving sound but Ron had already moved back into the foyer. The sound of his footsteps disappeared up the stairs.

Finally, Harry and Hermione were left alone.

The silence was a like a taut string between them.

Harry, briefly glancing in her direction, moved towards the table and began clearing the dishes.

Hermione came up next to him and directed the napkins into the laundry shoot with her wand.

"I did not wail on him," Hermione said softly, petulantly.

"I know."

They worked in silence a moment longer. Harry could feel that familiar bead of energy sliding down his back. He moved towards the sink and waved his wand at a sponge. He kept his eyes fixed on the plates.

"Harry," Hermione said, coming to stand behind him. "Are you all right?"

He tensed but kept his eyes straight. "Yeah. Why?"

"I don't know...you were just...quiet at dinner. At least, you didn't talk to me..."

She sounded...hurt?

Harry spun around and looked at her clearly for the first time that evening.

"Oh," he said lamely. "Was I supposed to talk to you?"

Hermione's brow furrowed. "'Supposed to?' Well, you certainly don't have to talk to me if you don't want to."

Harry grimaced. She had taken it the wrong way.

"I...it's not like that," he said quickly. "I was just asking... Did you want to talk to me about something?"

Hermione looked at him. She shrugged. "Not really."

Then, she ruined his fucking plan.

"I guess..." she said hesitantly, "I thought you might be interested to know that the six-month dry spell is over."

"Dry spell?"

"You know..." she said, her fingers twisting around themselves. "I said the last time was on his birthday, so I guess it makes sense that we would have...done it sometime around my birthday."

Harry stared at her, comprehension coming too fast, too strong.

"Oh...you mean," Harry faltered, "you and Ron..."

"Yeah," Hermione said softly, looking down.

Harry watched with a strange mixture of horror and hollowness as Hermione's cheeks flushed.

"Oh," said Harry, turning back to the sink. "That's great. I'm glad."

"Yeah," said Hermione quietly.

He screwed up his eyes. "And how was it?"

"Oh. It was fine."

Harry's hand involuntarily tightened around his wand.

"Always this word 'fine' with you," he nearly snapped. Harry hoped he sounded more nonchalant than he felt.

Hermione laughed. "Well, I didn't think you wanted the details or anything."

"Right."

Silence again. Harry kept his eyes trained on the cool water running from the faucet.

Thankfully, it was at that moment that Ron and Hugo reentered the kitchen.

"Ready?" Ron asked Hermione.

She didn't say anything for a second. Harry could feel her eyes on him.

"Yeah. I'm ready."

Pulling his face into a more composed expression, Harry turned around as Hermione was walking towards her family.

Ron raised his hand in farewell. "See you, mate!"

It took Harry a moment to realize Ron had spoken to him. He slowly raised his hand.

Ron, noticing nothing amiss, took Hermione's hand and she took Hugo's. A second before she was whipped into the air, her eyes met Harry's. She smiled slightly, nervously...and then she was gone.

Thus, with Hermione's strange smile in his mind, Harry found himself ordering opera tickets with Dudley Dursley's credit card. Harry had failed to tell Ginny what he was doing and could only hope she would agree to come after the tickets were bought.

As Harry hung up the phone with the London Opera saleswoman, he shook his head. There was simply no justifiable reason why he was doing this. Ginny had already voiced her opposition to attending. Moreover, Ron likely did not have high expectations that Harry and Ginny would actually be joining them at the opera.

So, why was he going? Harry certainly had no inherent interest in opera...he wasn't even entirely sure what it was. By and large, Harry had an eleven-year-old's understanding of the Muggle world and that understanding did not include opera.

Considering this, the answer was very clear: he was going for Hermione.

Part of it was the fact that Hermione seemed to enjoy the opera, and if she enjoyed it, by virtue of being her best friend, he should care about it a little, right?

The second, darker rationale was that Harry didn't like the idea of Ron and Hermione sharing a night alone together at the opera. For some reason, the vision of Hermione dressed in a beautiful gown with Ron at her side angered him. It was identical to the anger he had felt when Hermione divulged that she and Ron were having sex again.

That anger made him look at Ron with new eyes—as though Ron were an interloper on Harry and Hermione's relationship.

It was that realization that scared Harry. His anger was wholly, completely, and entirely unfounded. Why was he begrudging Ron's relationship with Hermione? He was her husband, after all. By definition, Ron's relationship with Hermione should take precedence over Harry's relationship with her. Furthermore, Harry's frustration certainly did not aid him in reestablishing his platonic friendship with Hermione.

Thus, Harry was thrust back into the bipolarity that had defined his life since his most recent kiss with Hermione.

He desperately wanted to forget about her—to not have her in the back of his mind every moment of the day. He wanted to recommit to Ginny. He wanted to treat Ron normally and not resent his best friend's relationship with his own wife.

But while he wanted all these things...he also wanted Hermione.

He wasn't sure how he wanted her...he just wanted her. Harry would be lying if he didn't say he desperately wanted to kiss her again. Just thinking about her lips was enough for Harry to lose all normal functionality. But he also just wanted her. He wanted her to talk to him, to smile at him, to know...for just a few moments...she was thinking only of him.

These desires had the tendency to derail Harry's very well-intentioned plan to treat Hermione solely as his friend. Yet, whenever she was around, his entire world seemed to focus in on one Hermione-shaped point. And under her influence, Harry found himself doing ridiculous things—like buying £500 opera tickets. It took a force of will to return to himself.

Of one thing Harry was certain: he could not live with such opposite desires for long.

The next day, Harry was sitting in his office reading through a horrendously long report on a recent case of underage magic. A flying broomstick had been spotted in a highly populated Muggle area. The incident had required eighteen Obliviations and the owner of the broom, a teenage boy, would have to attend a disciplinary hearing.

Harry, smiling slightly, had just signed his approval when there was a knock at the door.

"Chief?" Gwen said, poking her head through the crack in the door. "Counselor Granger for you."

"Oh?" said Harry, his chest tightening just as his heart decided it would like to run a marathon. "Send her in."

Hermione entered his office, smiling. She was wearing a grey satin blouse with a navy blue skirt under her autumn coat.

"Hey," she greeted him cheerfully. "Are you free for lunch?"

Despite Harry's recent torment regarding Hermione's sex life, the awkwardness surrounding the opera, and the numerous files spread out on his desk, all of that seemed to fall away as he looked at her. Harry didn't even have to think. For her, consent was instantaneous.

"Yes, of course," he stammered quickly, already reaching for his coat. "Where should we go?"

"Diagon Alley?" she suggested, holding the door open for him. "I have this overwhelming desire for one of those sandwiches at the Leaky Cauldron. You know the ones on the half-baguettes? The one I'm thinking of has ham, with that cheese, and the sauce...the sauce, Harry, the sauce..."

He smiled as he followed Hermione down a row of Auror cubicles. Several pairs of eyes flashed in their direction, not all of them friendly. By the elevators, Harry saw Yvain stand up at his desk.

"Sir?" the young Auror asked, curious.

"Don't worry, Yvain," Harry said, smiling. "We're just going out for lunch. No need for you and Cassy to follow."

And indeed, Harry saw Cassy gliding swiftly towards them, ready to follow after Hermione.

Harry and Hermione waved to them both before they entered the lift. He glanced at Hermione as she pressed the button for the Atrium level. She was wearing a satisfied smile.

In the quiet of the elevator Harry said, "I think you get a certain pleasure out of ditching them, Hermione. You always look far too happy to say 'goodbye' to them."

Hermione smiled even more broadly, grabbing one of the handholds dangling from the ceiling.

"Don't misunderstand," she said. "Yvain and Cassy are very nice. But how would you feel if you had a little posse of Aurors following you around in the market or waiting outside a bathroom for you?"

Half of me feels bad that I'm such a boring person to follow around. The other half is just annoyed they're following me at all..."

Harry chuckled as the lift came to a stop. "Well, you've been handling it very well. They've both been easy to work with, right?"

"Oh sure," Hermione said, stepping out of the lift. She grabbed Harry's arm so that they could stay together in the press of people leaving the Ministry for lunch. "You'll think this silly, but I have nicknames for them in my head. I call Yvain 'The Face' because God, have you seen his face? It's like someone thought it'd be a splendid idea to reincarnate a Greek god just so we can all feel bad about ourselves."

Harry's jaw tightened. He knew Yvain had been too good looking.

"Really, it's like he should be on the cover of a romance novel..."

"Okay, I get it."

"And Cassy...I call her my 'Raincloud.' That's partly because of her black hair and grey eyes. But then, she's also a little moody and mysterious like a raincloud—a little raincloud that follows me around. Anyway, I like them both."

Harry nodded as they pushed their way towards one of the crowded fireplaces lining the left wall of the Atrium. As they reached the front, Harry grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the large basin at the side of the grate.

"Give me your hand," Harry said to Hermione.

She untangled her arm from his. He placed half of the silvery powder in her palm.

They were at the front.

"Ladies first," Harry said, his hand grazing the small of her back.

Hermione blinked, a strange look crossing her face. But the line was pressing against her and she was pushed towards the grate. She stepped inside, and with a flash of violent, viridian light, she was gone.

Harry followed immediately after. Since his first use of Floo powder twenty-five years ago, Harry had never enjoyed the sensation of being shunted through the sooty network of fireplaces. When Harry spotted the Leaky Cauldron's grate, with Hermione's legs just in view, he gratefully stepped into it.

Harry coughed. He opened his eyes but his glasses were largely pasted over with soot.

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione, giggling. "You're all covered. Here."

There was a swooshing sound and the soot vanished.

Harry sighed. "Thanks. Cauldron's fireplace has always been the dirtiest, I suppose."

"Or you're just a magnet for soot."

Harry chuckled. "That too. Now, those sandwiches?"

Ten minutes later, Harry and Hermione emerged from the Leaky Cauldron with two heavily loaded sandwiches wrapped in paper. The pub had been far too crowded to find a place to sit and Harry was loathe to use his "I'm-famous-give-me-your-seat" powers. Hermione had mentioned that she wanted to look at the shops, so they stepped into the fall sunshine and began walking down the twisting alleyway.

"You know," said Hermione quietly, "that was the first time you ever said that to me."

"Said what?"

"'Ladies first.' You said it right before I went into the fireplace."

The pulse was back, running down his spine.

"Well, you are a lady."

Of this, Harry seemed painfully aware these days.

Hermione smiled, peeling back a corner of the paper from her sandwich. "Well, it's nice to hear it once in a while..."

Inexplicably, Harry's felt his face flush. He felt... eager to make her happy once more.

"Well, I can do it again," he stammered. A vendor had just pushed his cart into their path. He touched Hermione's arm and directed her to the side. "After you, my lady."

Hermione pulled a face. "Okay, we don't need to go that far."

Harry blushed deeper. "I'm sorry."

Hermione glanced at him before she smiled. She looped her arm back through his. "Don't be..."

Before Hermione could finish her thought, someone had thrust a platter of sample sweets into their faces. They were outside Sugarplum's Sweet Shop.

"Try our newest culinary confection," the worker said morosely. "You'll tingle when you taste our Tingling Treacle. Only ten Sickles a box."

"No thank you," Hermione said politely, pulling Harry towards her.

Once they were several yards away, Hermione said "I forgot it's not exactly easy to stroll down Diagon Alley. It's more like edging around potential collisions. Do you want to sit down?"

"Sure," he replied.

They were near a small patch of grass directly opposite Gringotts Bank. Harry and Hermione found an unoccupied bench and sat in silence finishing their sandwiches.

"How's the casework coming?" Harry asked, balling up his wrapper in his hand.

Almost imperceptibly, Hermione glanced around the square.

"It's fine," she said. "We've been conducting interviews—first with Callahan's wife and children. Naturally, they were not very helpful in providing information we could use. But then we tracked down a few current and former friends of his. That's led to some interesting leads regarding his past."

"And what did you find?" Harry asked lowly, keenly interested.

"It's somewhat hard to say," Hermione admitted. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'm not supposed to say anything about it—but, there's some evidence he was interested in the Bloodline Accord about a decade ago."

Harry narrowed his eyes.

The group had formed several years after the fall of Lord Voldemort. It was largely composed of pureblood witches and wizards, who shared the goal of preserving the complete separation of the wizard and Muggle worlds. At the extreme end, some members of the Bloodline Accord believed in the same outmoded tropes that had been around for centuries, namely that wizards should not have children with Muggles and that Muggle-borns should not be admitted to Hogwarts.

Generally, however, the group opposed many of the initiatives Hermione and others had championed over the years: intergovernmental exchanges with Muggles, fellowship programs, and Muggle-born advancement. While its positions were well known, the Accord itself was somewhat amorphous. By definition, the Accord was simply an agreement to protect wizarding culture from the supposedly insidious influence of Muggle society. Thus, any effort to promote wizarding values was under the purview of the Accord. Moreover, the leadership of the group kept the names of their affiliated members a secret, though they were known to influence several members of national and regional Wizengamots.

"How do you know that?" Harry asked. Such knowledge forced him to reassess, yet again, his understanding of Theo Callahan.

"Old contacts. All rumors and heresy right now. I shouldn't say more here," Hermione said tersely.

Harry nodded.

The Bloodline Accord. Harry had never given the group much thought before. He had always thought them to be a group of older witches and wizards who still clung to the notion of blood purity. Harry knew the group likely included former Death Eaters who had been acquitted for their involvement in the Second Wizarding War. Yet, the group had always operated in the background—and thus its influence and true capabilities were unknown.

Now, Harry felt that increasingly familiar sense of foreboding, of danger. While Harry was an Auror, and thus dealt with unsavory matters every day, he had not felt this particular sense of dread so deeply in many years. It seemed to seep into his skin. It disrupted his thoughts. Hermione figured prominently in that dread, and the same cold knot of panic he had felt when Hermione confronted Callahan and when she had received her first death threat bubbled to the surface of his brain.

He glanced at Hermione. She was flicking a piece of lettuce stuck to the corner of her wrapper, a troubled expression on her face. He decided to divert her attention away from the case.

"How's Daniel doing?" he asked casually, referring to Hermione's Muggle friend who was an architect and former wizarding fellow. Hermione and Daniel had had coffee a few days ago.

Yet, the change in topic did not seem to lighten Hermione's mood. Her perfect lips pursed themselves and she sighed.

"Well, I heard back from Hogwarts about his niece. You remember he asked if I could look into her magical status?"

"Yes. And?"

"She's a witch."

"Oh," Harry said, remembering the expression on Daniel's face when he had revealed the fact that strange occurrences kept happening around his young niece, Claire. "And what was his reaction?"

Hermione smiled slightly. "Well, he reacted exactly as I imagined he would. He said he was a little shocked, but largely happy they had a

witch in the family. He said he would break the news gently to his sister—with time she would understand."

Hermione sighed again. "I tried to explain to him that things have changed, you know? When I went to Hogwarts, there was no program in place to acquaint Muggle parents with the magical world their children were about to enter. Now, Muggle-borns and their parents can go to Hogwarts a week early for a special orientation program. Parents can visit at Easter and other important holidays. There's a telephone and Internet station in Hogsmeade specifically for Muggle-borns. And then there's the quota for Muggle-borns in Slytherin ...Anyway, I told him Hogwarts is not nearly as isolating as he would think and he seemed to agree."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" Harry said, still concerned by tension in Hermione's face.

"I hope so," she said slowly. "I think Daniel fully understands that he can remain just as involved in Claire's life as any uncle who has a niece in a boarding school. But, he said something at the end of our conversation that was...I don't know."

Harry looked at her expectantly.

Hermione shrugged. "He said he hoped Margie would let her go, as in he wasn't sure if Claire's mother was going to let her attend Hogwarts, you know? Hogwarts has had a hundred percent acceptance rate for over two decades now, especially since the Muggle-born measures were put in place." She sighed. "Claire is only six, so her mum has five years to adjust. Still, I hate it when this happens," she finished vehemently.

Harry nodded.

He felt like he understood what Hermione meant.

While Harry never voiced this concern, sometimes he truly resented the fact that he had two children at Hogwarts. He barely saw his sons anymore. James had never been very good at writing home to keep his parents informed about his activities. More often than not, it was Hogwarts that wrote to Harry and Ginny about James' behavior. While Albus was a much more reliable correspondent...it wasn't the

same. Harry wanted to see them, to hear their voices. He missed them terribly and Christmas seemed ages away.

Years ago, Harry would have said it was impossible for him to have anything but unconditionally positive feelings towards Hogwarts. After all, Hogwarts was the first place he could call a home. He had met his best friends there. He had fallen in love with his wife there. He had known success and failure and acceptance at the distant wizarding school.

But, Harry was a father now. And from that perspective, having his children leave him at age eleven...well, it seemed far too young, far too soon.

Yet, at least Harry could take solace in the fact that he was a wizard. In an emergency, he could apparate to see them. Beyond that, he was constantly being invited to special lectures at his former school. Moreover, Harry knew Hogwarts like the handle of his Firebolt—every hidden passage, every trick step, every annoying painting. He knew what Albus and James were learning, what food they were eating, and what sports they were playing.

If he had been a Muggle father, however, he would have nothing. Only the word of a group of strange individuals that his son or daughter would be safe, that he or she would receive the best education for their unique talents.

But Harry knew—for the care and protection of James and Albus—someone's word would never be enough.

Harry and Hermione remained silent for several more minutes. The streets were becoming quieter now. People were returning to work.

Finally, Hermione spoke.

"Speaking of children," Hermione said cheerfully. "How would you feel about seeing the Camerons tomorrow? I got an owl this morning from the Head Healer at St. Mungo's—Healer Waltham, I think his name was?—and he said he had an update on the Camerons' condition. I hope that means something good has finally happened with their memories! If not, it would still be nice to visit, wouldn't it?"

Harry had to smile looking at her beaming face. "It would be," he replied easily. "I'd like to see Duncan again."

"Great! I think I will bring him more books. I have the feeling he's already finished the five or so I gave him. Do you want to give him one? I was thinking of taking him one of Ron's Quidditch books, but then I think Ron is rather touchy about them...so..."

He laughed. "Sure, I'll bring him one of mine. It's got to be better than Hogwarts, A History or whatever horribly obscure book you've given him."

Hermione shook her head, the sunlight catching in her soft curls. "I'll have you know that Duncan actually likes my taste in literature. Not all men are sports-crazed philistines."

Harry wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but he rolled his eyes to humor her. She laughed and Harry was momentarily entranced by the bright spark that lit her eyes.

Getting up slowly, Hermione stretched an arm high above her head. She glanced at the wad of paper in her own and Harry's hand. A moment later, she removed her wand and the paper vanished.

She turned towards the direction they had come. Harry felt a strange desire to postpone their return, to keep her with him a little longer.

"Hey," Harry blurted, "would you mind if I stop by Gringotts? I have to get some Muggle...money..."

Hermione's brow crinkled. "Okay...Why?"

Harry blushed slightly. It seemed whenever he was around Hermione these days, his mouth moved faster than his mind.

"Er...I have to pay Dudley back for something?"

"Dudley?" Hermione repeated, surprised. "What would you need to pay him back for?"

Harry looked at his feet. "Opera tickets."

Hermione went silent.

"Would...would this happen to be the same opera Ron is taking me too?"

"Yes," Harry said hesitantly.

"And now you want to go?"

"Ginny and I," Harry corrected her quickly...though the Ginny portion wasn't entirely true.

"You and Ginny," Hermione repeated slowly. A sudden look of suspicion crossed her face. "You wouldn't happen to be doing this because of Ron, would you?"

No. It's because of you.

"Er," Harry stammered, running a hand through his hair.

"Harry," Hermione said sternly, "did Ron ask you to come with us?"

"Er..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, that explains why he suggested I wear those headphones my dad gave me..."

Harry shuffled his feet, his face growing red. "I can cancel them, if you want..."

Please say you don't mind. Please.

"No," Hermione said slowly. "It's fine if you come. I don't mind. It might be nice to have you both with us if Ron is only going to complain through the entire performance."

Harry released an inaudible breath.

"But, I'm sorry you had to pay money for them," Hermione said worriedly. "It's not like Ron's birthday present to me should cost you anything."

"No, I was happy to," Harry said in a rush. "It could be interesting, I suppose."

Hermione smiled softly, not really believing him. "And Ginny? She's fine with coming along as well?"

Harry laughed awkwardly. "Well, I haven't really asked her yet. I think she'll be fine with it..."

Hermione looked at him strangely. "All right," she finally said.

"Great," Harry said, relieved. "So you'll come with me to Gringotts?"

Hermione smirked. "I don't really have a choice, do I? I'm not supposed to go anywhere without you or the bodyguards."

"Nice answer," Harry said, pleased.

"Though, I guess I'd be happy to go with just Yvain..." Hermione said sweetly.

Harry's expression darkened. She laughed.

"I'm kidding," she said. "Lead the way."

Several hours later, Harry landed in the front yard of Dudley Dursley's home.

It was a fine, well-appointed little house. It had a white door and Tudor-style roof. The redbrick pathway leading up to the house was cleanly swept and the leaves in the yard were pushed into a corner.

Dudley had moved into the house after he married his wife, Shannon. They had two children: their thirteen-year-old daughter, Violet, and their eleven-year-old son, John. Dudley made a reasonable living as a life insurance broker, though his wife was actually a very successful hospital administrator.

Harry's Aunt Petunia, always one to dote upon her only child, lived close by in a home for the elderly. Uncle Vernon had died of heart failure six years after Harry's battle with Voldemort. Harry had attended the funeral.

Now, as Harry approached the door, he furtively touched his wand inside his cloak. Whispering an incantation, he watched as the air

seemed to ripple in front of Dudley's house. Harry examined the strange screen and then nodded to himself.

Harry had never told Dudley he had placed protective enchantments over his home. Since Harry was still the target of death threats, he had felt compelled to provide some magical protection for Dudley's family as well.

Harry stopped before the door and rang the bell. A dog immediately started barking inside. Harry rolled his eyes. One of Aunt Marge's broods had come to live with Dudley four years ago, and much like Aunt Marge, the dog hated Harry.

A moment later, Dudley cracked open the door, pushing the dog back with his foot.

"Hi, Harry," he said, smiling briefly. "Heel Marley! Come in, come in."

Harry stepped inside, looking dubiously at the bulldog.

"Still doesn't like me, does she?" Harry asked jokingly.

"Yeah, well," Dudley said, grunting as he leaned down and scooped up the dog before it could charge at Harry. "What can you do?"

Harry watched as Dudley strode down the front hallway, the dog under his arm.

"Honey! Harry is here!" he called up the stairs. "Kids! Your uncle!"

Even though Harry was technically the children's second cousin, they still called him "uncle."

A woman emerged out of the kitchen as Dudley placed Marley outside in the yard.

"Harry!" Shannon Dursley cried happily. "So good to see you! It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Harry smiled, embracing her. "It has. That's my fault. I'm sorry."

"Oh no," Shannon said, patting him on the back. "We know you're very busy. But Violet keeps asking about her cousin Lily."

Harry nodded, remaining silent. Harry's children were not exactly fond of Violet Dursley, though they did like John. Lily was particularly adamant that she loathed spending time with her older, female cousin. Indeed, Violet exhibited many of the worst traits Harry remembered in the girl's father so many years ago—she was bossy, selfish, and loud.

Harry heard the back door slam and Dudley returned, coming to stand by his wife.

Harry briefly took in the pair of them.

Dudley and Shannon were well matched. Dudley, who had lost a lot of weight in his late teens and early twenties, had gained much of it back. He was husky, but nowhere near the colossal girth of the late Uncle Vernon.

Shannon was short and pleasantly plump. She had cropped blond hair and Harry rarely saw her out of a pantsuit. Her eyes were bright, crystal blue and she was one of the nicest people Harry had ever met. When Harry first met her over fifteen years ago, he had had no idea how Dudley found her.

Harry credited Shannon with bringing about the most remarkable change in Dudley's disposition. Dudley was still brusque and awkward with Harry, but he was never openly hostile and, at times, Dudley seemed genuinely content to be in Harry's company. Seeing Dudley with his children had also revealed that Dudley was a much gentler man than Harry ever realized. The death of Vernon Dursley and Dudley's marriage to Shannon had done much to change Harry's cousin over the years...

"Come sit down, won't you?" Shannon asked, bustling to Harry's side and taking him by the arm. "You have a moment, don't you? I can fix us some tea and you can tell us what you've been getting up to."

"Er, all right," Harry said, letting Shannon guide him to the parlor. Harry had never been able to say 'no' to her. She ordered people around in such a cheery and friendly fashion that no one ever realized they were doing exactly what she wanted...

The parlor looked very much like the old parlor at Privet Drive. Indeed, Aunt Petunia had had a heavy hand in decorating Dudley's home. There were white doilies along the mantelpiece and meticulously-aligned pictures on the walls. Harry briefly glanced at the photographs. Of course, they were mostly of Dudley and his family, but a few stuck out to Harry's eye.

One was a picture of Dudley and Shannon at Harry and Ginny's wedding reception. He and Ginny were standing next to the couple, Harry looking vaguely surprised to be in a picture with Dudley. Ginny looked a little standoffish (she had mostly heard horrible stories about Harry's cousin).

Further down the wall was another picture. It was of Dudley, Shannon, and Aunt Petunia crowded around a hospital bed. Uncle Vernon was on the bed holding a small baby Violet in his arms. She had been born one week before Uncle Vernon died. Though Vernon had tubes placed under his nose, and his skin had turned a mottled grey, he was still smiling ear-to-ear as he gazed at his only granddaughter.

Harry turned around to face Dudley, who had settled himself into an armchair. The chair faced a television that was on mute.

Harry rifled through his cloak and removed a pouch.

"I can't thank you enough, Dud," he said, pulling out several notes resting atop his wizard currency. "Sorry I couldn't find another way to buy them..."

Dudley took the money. "Like I said, it's no problem."

There was a soft clattering sound and Shannon entered the parlor carrying a tea set. She spied the money in Dudley's hand.

"Oooh, what's this now?" she said. "I hear you're taking Ginny to an opera, Harry? Is that right?"

"Er, yeah," Harry replied awkwardly. "Dudley was kind enough to help me out in buying the tickets."

"Well of course he was," Shannon said, smiling fondly at her husband. "That's what family does." Her eyes wandered to the pouch Harry still had in his hand.

"What's in there?" she asked.

"Oh, it's some of our money," Harry said, hoping she understood that he meant wizard currency.

"Oooh," Shannon cooed again. "Can I see it?"

"Well, sure," Harry chuckled, amused by the childlike expression on her face.

He pulled the drawstring on the pouch and spilled several coins onto her hand.

"Wow," Shannon sighed as Dudley stood up to join them. "This gold one's huge!"

"That's a Galleon," Harry explained. "The silver ones are Sickles and the bronze ones are Knuts."

"Oh, I see. Such funny names..." she mused, flipping over a Galleon in her hand. Dudley, in turn, picked up a Sickle. "And what's the exchange rate, Harry?" Shannon asked jokingly.

Harry laughed. "There actually is one. I know that the Galleons are worth five quid each. Don't really know about the others..."

"But, my goodness! They're so heavy! How do you carry this around all day?"

"Oh. I just use a Lightening Charm on the bag. They weigh barely anything then."

"Really now?" Shannon said, impressed. She slipped the coins back into Harry's pouch. "We'll have to call you next time we're going to Majorca then, Harry. Maybe you can put a little Lightening Charm on our luggage so we can get out of the baggage fees?" she laughed, slapping his arm.

Harry laughed along as well. Dudley was smiling softly at his wife.

Harry knew that, much like his father, Dudley had been quite opposed to telling Shannon that his cousin was a wizard. But, as it turned out, Shannon already knew about the magical world. Her sister-in-law was a witch and she had been quite ecstatic to learn that Dudley had a magical cousin. She treated magic like a quirky anomaly in her life and was fascinated whenever Harry told her stories about the magical world.

That said, Dudley's children did not know about Harry's world. Dudley and Shannon seemed to be saving that information for when the children were older...

Just then, the children themselves appeared in the parlor. Harry quickly tucked the pouch into his cloak.

"John!" Harry called out. He quickly knelt down and hugged the boy. "How are you, mate?"

"Fine, Uncle Harry," the boy said, smiling.

Violet came up to her uncle somewhat stiffly. "Hi, Uncle Harry," she said, giving him a one-armed hug.

"How are you guys? You keeping up on your schoolwork?" Harry asked.

"Yessir," said John. Violet simply nodded.

"Well, good," Harry said slowly, raising his hands behind each of their ears and magicking some chocolate. "Then you deserve some sweets!"

John laughed, taking the candy. Violet might have rolled her eyes before she too took the chocolate. She saw Harry as that uncle—the one who thought he was a magician.

Dudley's family, along with Harry, settled in the parlor for tea. John squeezed in next to his mother in an armchair while his sister sat desolately by the door, texting on her cell phone. Dudley filled Harry in on the latest football news—it was a game Harry vaguely remembered liking as a child when he was able to watch scant minutes of it while Uncle Vernon wasn't looking.

As inevitably happened when Harry was around Shannon, however, tea turned into supper. He tried to protest that he needed to return home to help Ginny with dinner, but Shannon flatly denied him. This, combined with the fact that Dudley was actually a terrific cook, convinced Harry that he could miss one meal at home.

As Harry helped himself to a second helping of pork roast and red potatoes, he watched Dudley out of the corner of his eye.

Sometimes, it was difficult for Harry to forget the Dudley he had grown up with.

His cousin defined a large part of Harry's hellish childhood. Indeed, even now when Harry looked at Dudley, he felt an odd primal stirring of distrust and even anger.

He supposed that might never go away...

But, the Dudley that sat before him now was radically different. Harry had begun to see that transformation on the front lawn of Privet Drive nineteen years ago when Dudley had shook Harry's hand and wished him well. Now, a combination of the absence of his father and the influence of his wife and children had completed a two decades' long transformation. How very different this man was from the pudgy boy who had sprouted a pig's tail in a distant, sea-soaked cabin.

And how differently Harry was forced to see him. There was a time when Dudley's every pain was Harry's delight. Several years before that, Harry would have given anything to have what Dudley had—a mother who looked at him the way Aunt Petunia looked at her son.

Dudley was still gruff and demanding. He was still a little narcissistic. But that bubble of self-concern had come to envelop his wife, his children...and to some extent, Harry. And that was enough for him.

"So how is Ginny, Harry?" Shannon was asking.

"She's fine, thank you," Harry replied cordially while scooping up a forkful of the roast. "The paper keeps her busy, of course. She's also planning this massive party at our house for New Year's," Harry said, inadvertently rubbing his temple. "Of course, you are all invited."

Shannon shared a small smile with her husband. She knew the limits of what Dudley could take in terms of magic.

"Oh, that sounds lovely, Harry," she said kindly. "But I think we'll have a quiet New Year's here at home. We usually spend it with Dudley's mother and the kids stay up late for the fireworks."

Harry smiled, expecting this answer.

"Of course. We'd love to have you, but we understand."

"And Hermione?"

Harry looked up. Dudley had spoken.

"What?" Harry asked, alarmed. Why was his face already growing warm?

"How's Hermione?" Dudley repeated. "Isn't she one of those friends of yours?"

In another context, Harry might have wanted to roll his eyes that Dudley would refer to Hermione as "one of those friends" when Harry had known her for twenty-six years. But, Harry was too distracted by the need to slow his own thundering heart.

"Er, she's fine too. She's working on an important case...these days," Harry said. He didn't want to explain further.

"Oh, well I certainly hope she isn't working herself too hard," Shannon said, concerned. "Did I tell you we've recently started seeing Hermione's father for Violet's teeth? It turns out she needs to wear headgear to bed..."

"Mum!" Violet shouted, finally looking up from her phone.

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear," Shannon said offhandedly. "Uncle Harry doesn't care, do you Harry?"

Harry smiled. "Nope."

"Anyway, ever since Hermione mentioned her father was a dentist, we've been going to him ever since. He's an exceptionally kind man," Shannon said.

"He is," Harry agreed quietly.

There was silence for a moment. Harry could feel Shannon watching him.

"Mum, is there dessert today?" John piped up.

"Of course, dear!" Shannon cried, scooting back her chair and shuffling towards the refrigerator.

Harry briefly caught Dudley's eye as Shannon removed a tub of ice cream from the freezer. At least the Dursley appetite had not changed.

An exhausted Harry returned home at ten that evening, his stomach bursting and his eyelids drooping. Hanging his cloak in the foyer, Harry briefly wondered if anyone was home. The kitchen was dark, the nearby library quiet. But then, the sound of laughter coming from the lounge reached his ears.

Harry's brow crinkled. Lily should have been in bed already and they were not expecting any company tonight.

Walking down the darkened hallway, Harry reached the entrance of the lounge and peered inside. His heartbeat immediately took up its familiar feverish pace. Hermione was sitting inside with Ginny and Ron. The latter two were engaged in a lively discussion while Hermione looked on, slowly sipping wine.

Harry knocked on the door. "Hey," he simply said.

"Harry!" Ginny called out warmly, getting up and quickly grabbing his hand. She led him towards the couch. "We were wondering where you were."

Harry was about to explain about the Dursleys, but Ginny did not seem particularly interested in hearing about his whereabouts.

"We were just debating what sort of music we should have for the party," Ginny explained. "Ron's in favor of just a regular live band, but I think we should try and book someone famous."

"Oh?" Harry said, trying to ignore the long digit of numbers that flashed through his head at Ginny's suggestion. "Well..."

Just then, Hermione laughed.

"I don't think Harry's going to like that, Ginny," she said, smiling. "I can see the sticker shock in his eyes."

Harry blinked, momentarily surprised Hermione had read his expression so easily.

Ginny frowned.

"It's not like we put on a party every year," she said defensively. "What's wrong with making sure this is one people will remember?"

Harry was still standing. Ginny pulled him onto the couch by the hand.

"What do you think, Harry?" she asked seriously.

Harry's attention, however, was directed towards Ron and Hermione. They were both sitting on the opposite couch. Hermione was wearing a pair of well-worn jeans and a pale green sweater. One of her knees was tucked up against herself, while her other foot grazed the carpet. One arm was draped around the end of the couch. The other...

The other arm was looped through Ron's. She was holding his hand.

Harry felt like he stared at their entwined fingers for ages before he realized Ginny had asked him a question.

"Er...about the band?" he stammered, his face growing hot.

"Yes. Live band or a special performance," Ginny replied, clearly placing her emphasis on the latter option.

"I dunno, Gin," Harry said slowly, dragging his eyes back to his wife. "There are some pretty good live bands I'm sure..."

Ginny rolled her eyes, exasperated. "If you're worried about the cost, we could always see who would be willing to perform for free. I'm sure plenty of artists would die for the chance to perform at the party. You are you, after all. They'd consider it an honor."

Harry's jaw tightened.

"Well, we'll see, won't we?" Hermione interjected lightly. "I think Ron and I had better head home now, though."

"Yeah, it's getting late," Ron said, gently releasing Hermione's hand. He slowly stood up and stretched. "Mum's been watching Hugo for a while now. She can't stay awake as long as she used to—would've been great if she'd been like that when I was younger..."

Harry laughed automatically.

He followed Ron, Hermione, and Ginny out of the room. Once they had reached the foyer, Ron and Hermione moved towards the cloakroom to gather their things.

Ginny turned to him slightly as she moved towards the kitchen. Harry followed her, briefly glancing at Ron and Hermione as he passed.

"So, did you want dinner?" Ginny was asking. "I can reheat something for you."

"No, I'm fine. I ate already."

Ginny simply nodded, likely assuming work had kept him late at the AD. She looked at the empty dinner table and nodded. She produced her wand and extinguished the lights.

Harry and Ginny moved back into the foyer. Ron and Hermione looked just about ready to leave.

"Well, I'll see you guys later then," Ginny said to the pair. She was already climbing the stairs. "I've got to wake up early to brief my team on the coverage tomorrow."

Ron nodded, pleased. Tomorrow was another national Quidditch semi-final.

As Ginny disappeared around the top of the stairs, Ron turned towards Harry.

"Did you get the opera tickets?" he asked urgently.

"Oh, er...yes," Harry replied, distracted.

"Thank God!" Ron said in an audible whisper. "That's great."

Hermione came up behind her husband. "Yes, yes. You got your wish didn't you, Ron?" she asked sarcastically.

Ron smiled. "It'll be better with the four of us. It'll be like celebrating your birthday all over again."

Hermione simply shook her head, smiling. Ron gazed warmly back at her and Harry felt his stomach turn over.

"Have you told Ginny yet?" Hermione asked, turning her gaze on Harry.

Harry glanced at her. He had difficulty meeting her eyes.

"Not yet," he said.

"Don't worry about it," said Ron nonchalantly. "She won't put up too much of a fight if we're all going."

Harry simply nodded.

"And we're still on for St. Mungo's tomorrow?" Hermione asked him.

"Of course," Harry said quickly. "What time?"

"Noon or so?"

"Okay," he replied. Harry briefly glanced at Ron. He did not seem surprised by their exchange and Harry quickly realized that

Hermione had likely already told him about the visit to see the Camerons.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then," Harry said, feeling the need to dismiss himself.

"Right, see you tomorrow," Hermione said quietly.

Harry quickly climbed the stairs. Once he had turned out of sight from the entryway, he sighed.

How was it that his days must now be defined by violent swings in his interactions with Hermione? First, she was telling him she was sleeping with Ron again. Then, she was sharing deeply personal information with him and solely inviting him to visit the Camerons. Yet, the confidence he shared with Hermione seemed to evaporate under the influence of the entwined hands and warm smiles between Hermione and her husband.

It was infuriating, maddening. Yet, he knew he could live off Hermione's smiles and invitations for days. So, what was he so worked up about?

Harry was walking slowly towards his bedroom when he heard laughter from the foyer. Hermione's laughter.

Harry thought about turning around, but stopped himself.

They'll be disappearing any second, Harry reasoned.

But then a carrying whisper from the foyer reached his ear.

"Ron, we have to go," said Hermione insistently. "Stop, won't you?"

Harry felt his feet carrying him back towards the entryway. He stopped just at the top of the stairs, partially hidden by a wooden pillar.

Then, Harry saw them.

Ron had Hermione cornered against the wall. He was wrapping his arms around her waist as he lowered his lips to her neck. Hermione

shied away, smiling. But then Ron lifted his hand and directed her face towards his.

Their lips touched.

A frigid poison seemed to flow through Harry's body, hardening his muscles. His green eyes locked on the scene before him, unable to look away.

They were kissing—a familiar and practiced kiss—the kiss of two people who have known each other for a very long time. It was gentle, but somehow urgent.

Hermione pulled away first. She smiled at her husband and trailed her hand down his arm, entwining her fingers through his.

"Let's go," she seemed to whisper.

Harry could not see Ron's face, but he nodded. He opened the door for her, and together they slipped out into the night. A moment later, they had disappeared.

Harry stared at the door for several minutes before he realized he wasn't breathing. His hand was gripping the banister so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

Slowly and almost mechanically, Harry turned and walked towards the bedroom. When he stepped inside, the room was nearly dark, one lamp providing a warm, orange glow. The bathroom door was shut and a streak of light was peeking out from under the threshold. Harry heard the gentle rush of water from behind the door—Ginny was showering.

His arms shaking, Harry moved towards the high windows at the far end of the room. He looked out onto the vast expanse of the front lawn. The moonlight hit the leaves and grass, igniting them like a beacon.

Harry grabbed one end of the curtains and shut them, almost violently. The room became even darker. Then, he slowly sat on the cushioned bench beneath the windows. He placed his hands on his knees and stared at the carpet.

For what seemed like ages, Harry gazed blindly at the floor, listening to the sound of running water in the next room. He remained utterly still, his deep breaths his only movement.

Finally, Harry heard the taps switch off in the bathroom. A few minutes later, Ginny emerged wrapped in a white towel. She did not notice Harry sitting by the window and went about brushing her long, wet hair. Then, she removed the towel and began drying herself more thoroughly.

It was then she saw Harry.

"Oh!" she said, surprised. She partially covered herself again, though her breasts remained visible. "I didn't realize you came in. Did Ron and Hermione leave?"

Harry didn't respond. He watched her silently and then slowly stood up.

As he approached, Ginny's fine eyebrows crinkled slightly.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, looking at him with slight trepidation.

In response, Harry stopped before her. He removed her towel and dropped it on the floor.

Ginny's eyes widened slightly.

"Harry," she said, "what's wrong—"

"Nothing," he replied and leaning down, enveloped her in his arms. "Nothing."

Ginny was stiff in his embrace, but she did not protest as Harry pressed her naked body against his fully clothed frame.

Ginny was about to speak again, but Harry buried his face into her hair.

"I love you," he said.

"I-I love you too," Ginny replied, surprised. "Are you...are you all right?"

Instead of answering, Harry nudged her chin upwards with his face, and rising above her, placed his lips over hers. Harry immediately opened his mouth and slipped his tongue inside. Ginny gasped, but returned the kiss with equal fervor.

Harry did not think. He lost himself in the feel of lips moving against his own, of a body pressed against his. He raised his hand and cupped her breast, rubbing his thumb across the peak.

Ginny let out a soft moan and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Harry pulled away slightly, a memory forcing him to stop. The last person who had moaned like that against his lips had been...Hermione.

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Ginny carefully. Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted awaiting the return of his lips.

This is right, he thought. This is my wife. There's nothing else to want.

In the next moment, Harry pushed Ginny onto the bed.

She giggled in surprise, but her gaze became serious as Harry lowered himself onto her. He returned his lips to her mouth, pressing himself hard against her.

He let Ginny undress him, first by removing his shirt and then his pants and boxers. Harry trailed kisses down her jaw line, sucking on the sensitive skin of her neck. He knew every pressure point, every supple line of her body. He knew her body whole and complete.

"Harry," Ginny gasped several minutes later, "we should lock the door. Lily..."

"I don't care," he replied roughly.

Ginny didn't press him and let Harry continue his ministrations. When Harry finally entered her, she stifled a cry and closed her eyes. Harry thrust himself into her, cradling her head in his arm.

Yet, Harry watched Ginny's face with an almost clinical detachment, every movement meant to reinforce a simple mantra.

This is my wife, whom I love.

Hermione is a poison. This is the cure.

And when they collapsed in the aftershocks of their lovemaking, Harry brought Ginny close to him. She sighed, resting against his chest. He stroked her hair automatically, staring at the silken canopy above their heads.

Yet, in that moment, he finally let his mind drift down its natural stream of thought. It always led to Hermione.

He remembered how the sunlight had caught in her hair as she invited him to St. Mungo's.

He remembered her flushed cheeks as she told him about her and Ron's reconnection.

He remembered the soft whimpers that escaped her throat as Harry kissed her.

He remembered holding her hand under the table during an unusual dinner party...

A lifetime of memories with Hermione smeared across his mind. All confusing and mesmerizing at the same time.

But Harry shook his head, agitated. He glanced at Ginny in his arms. She was nearly asleep, her long eyelashes resting on her cheeks. The longer he stared at her, the greater his resolve became.

It ends now. This has gone on long enough.

Chapter 13: Promise Kept

A bright beam of light hit his eyes.

Jolting slightly, Harry peered through heavy eyelids.

The curtains were swaying. He had left the windows open last night and a breeze was pushing the drapes apart, sending bright shocks of light through Harry's bedroom. It must have been early morning.

Groaning, Harry tried to turn over to retrieve his glasses, but he could not. There was a weight on his arm.

He turned to find Ginny's head peaceably cradled in the crook of his shoulder. She was still fast asleep, her mouth slightly parted.

Though his vision was blurry, Harry stared at her.

He knew exactly what had happened. How many times in his life had he awoken in such a way? With Ginny asleep in his arms after a heated night together?

Turning onto his side slowly, so as not to wake her, Ginny came into sharper focus. Hesitating, Harry lifted his free hand and lightly ran a finger along her bare shoulder, wending it down her spine before stopping at her waist.

He gazed at his pale hand upon her pale flesh.

Carefully and very slowly, he pressed his fingers into her skin. Removing his hand, he saw the flashing, red imprint of his fingers appear and then slowly fade away. Her skin became porcelain once more.

Ginny stirred and Harry looked back at her face. Her mouth twitched, but she continued to sleep.

Harry settled back onto his pillow, watching her. The events of last night flashed through his mind—a confusing mess of heat and motion.

Yet, at least one good thing had come out of it. Harry finally realized he needed to reestablish order in his life. What's more is that he had

come to the decision that Ginny would be the new foundation of that order.

From what Harry had seen in the foyer last night, it appeared Hermione and Ron were still very much in love. Perhaps they had been going through a rough patch over the last year, but now they seemed to have reconciled.

Why should he, Harry, disturb that? Especially when it was something both of his best friends wanted? Hadn't Hermione said to him that her first priority was to fix her marriage with Ron? Hadn't Ron said that he wished Hermione remembered him when she was stressed or in trouble? He obviously wanted to reconnect with his wife as well.

Second, how could Harry justify his strange desire for Hermione when he knew it was not reciprocated? While Harry viewed his time with Hermione as transcendent, she only seemed to consider it a nuisance, a distraction from reestablishing a healthy relationship with Ron.

No. There was far too much pain in unreciprocated feelings. Harry had no time and no stomach for that.

Hermione had chosen to focus on Ron. And thus, Harry would do the same...with Ginny.

It was an easy conclusion to come to, and as Harry gazed at Ginny, he began to truly consider her for the first time in what felt like years.

Ginny Potter. His wife.

At thirty-six, she was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Her rich crimson hair had not faded with age, though a few charming blond streaks added dimension. The gentle lines of her face were only slightly distorted by the scythe of time. Her eyes, though currently closed, were a piercing grey and her fine brows were beautifully expressive—conveying everything from anger to lust to joy in a single glance. A pert nose and full lips completed her face. Light freckles still dusted her cheeks, the result of many years spent playing on or reporting from the Quidditch pitch.

And her body...about this, what could Harry say? He was a lucky man—he was entirely sure legions of men were incredibly envious that such a stunningly beautiful woman had become Harry's wife. Even after three children, she was perfectly proportioned. Full breasts, a slender waist, and long, luxurious legs. Add to this her creamy and flawless skin, and Ginny was undeniably breathtaking.

Yet, as Harry completed the inventory of her beauty, he tried to summon up that feeling of lust he usually experienced when he considered Ginny's physical attributes.

But...he felt nothing.

If anything, he felt only a faint memory of feelings past...

How strange...

There had been a time in his life when Harry had been wholly obsessed with the woman currently lying naked in his arms. In his sixth year, when Harry first began to recognize that Ginny as more than Ron's sister, his attraction for her had been very much like a roaring monster in his chest.

After Voldemort's death, he began dating Ginny in earnest. Harry remembered this as a very happy time. Little talking and a lot of sex. He was still very much a boy then, and the rages of lust and hormones that Harry had suppressed for so long finally seemed to overtake him. At times, it seemed he could never have enough of Ginny Weasley.

Sighing now, Harry returned his hand to Ginny's waist, letting his fingers graze the delicate skin there. He pressed his fingers into her flesh once more.

Again, the same red, finger-shaped welts. Again, the fading into nothing.

Why was it that just when Harry had decided to recommit to Ginny that his attachment to her felt no more permanent than those imprints on her skin?

I'm confused right now, Harry thought quickly. There's no need to worry. I've spent so many weeks being distracted by Her...by her,

that this'll take some time. Recommitting to Ginny won't happen just like that...I have to try. I have to work at it. Then, the real emotions will come back.

He watched as Ginny's eyelashes trembled slightly.

I...I still love her, don't I?

No obvious answer came, sending a wave of panic through him.

I still love her. I do. I wouldn't have married her if I didn't, right? She's beautiful, wonderful. She's a wonderful mother...she's given me the children. Of course I love her.

This last thought, more than anything, set Harry's mind at ease. How could he not feel a rush of love and gratitude for Ginny when she had given him the gift of being a father? He couldn't imagine a life without James, Albus, and Lily. The children alone were enough of a reason for Harry to love his wife with the utmost devotion. It was as simple as that.

Harry smiled slightly as he thought this. Gently, he leaned down and placed a kiss on Ginny's forehead. And then another.

She stirred.

Harry moved to her neck.

Finally, Ginny awoke, and realizing what was happening, moaned appreciatively.

Harry brought his lips to hers. She returned the kiss slowly, leisurely. A morning's kiss.

"Well, hello," Ginny mumbled as Harry pulled away to return to her neck. "When did you become so cheerful in the mornings?"

Harry tried to say something he might have said years ago...

"Since I woke up with you in my arms..."

Ginny giggled, pleased.

They were silent as they kissed.

Finally, Ginny pulled away. She glanced at the light peeping through the curtains.

"It must be getting late," she said regretfully. "I've got to get to the pitch."

"Do you?" Harry breathed lightly against her skin.

Ginny laughed again. "Yes," she said insistently. "There's a very important match today, as if you didn't know, Harry Potter."

He groaned in assent, flipping onto his back.

Ginny sat up slightly, watching him. The sheets slipped down, leaving her torso bare.

"Hey," she said, excitedly, "why don't you come? Watch the match with me. I can get you a seat in the top box and it's Saturday. Surely you don't have that much work."

Harry nodded, barely glancing at her nudity.

This was true. There was no pressing need to go to the AD and he actually wanted to see the Cannons play the Falcons. It was the first time in over two decades that the Cannons had made the playoffs...

"That'd be nice," Harry said slowly. "What time does the match start?"

"Twelve," she answered. "I've got to get down there much earlier to do some pre-game coverage and interviews. You see..."

But Harry had stopped listening.

Twelve? Wasn't something else happening at twelve?

Harry felt the strangest sensation—his stomach was dropping while his heart was soaring?

"Oh...er, Ginny?" he interrupted.

She looked at him.

"I forgot that..." he swallowed. "Well, I promised Hermione that I'd visit the Camerons with her today...at noon."

Ginny stared at him, not understanding. "The Camerons?"

"Yes. You know...the Muggle family Hermione will be defending?"

"I know who they are," Ginny nearly snapped. Her brows rose. "Why is it you have to visit them today?"

"Well, Hermione said there was an update on their condition. Plus...you liked Duncan, didn't you? He really could use some company."

Ginny's face softened only slightly.

"Gin," Harry said steadily, picking up her hand. "At most, it'll be one hour. I'll apparate to the field right after and still catch most of the game. You know the Falcons and Cannons both have notoriously bad Seekers."

Ginny nodded, not looking at him.

"All right," she said, somewhat coolly. She slipped her hand out from his and moved to the edge of the bed. Without bothering to cover herself, she got up and walked rather alluringly towards the bathroom. Her brilliant hair fell beautifully down her back.

"Wake Lily up, won't you?" she called over her shoulder. "She wanted to come with me. We'll need to leave in forty-five minutes or so."

"Okay," Harry replied.

Without another word, Ginny shut the bathroom door.

Harry stared at the door for a moment until he heard the sound of running water.

Turning away, he groaned softly and lay back in bed.

He could tell Ginny was upset with him. And to be honest, Harry was upset as well. Watching the game with Ginny would have been a lovely way for Harry to begin his reconnection with her.

But...he had made a promise to Hermione. He couldn't just back out of that, could he?

It's not about her anyway, Harry thought purposefully. It's about the Camerons, about Duncan. That's all.

Ginny and Lily left at nine that morning. After making breakfast, Harry apparated into the Ministry in order to finish some work before meeting Hermione.

When he arrived, the Auror pool was nearly empty. Only essential staff was on duty for the weekend. Indeed, Harry knew many of his Aurors would be at the National Quidditch Pitch to watch the match itself. Hopefully, in a several hours' time, Harry would be joining them.

Waving to the few Aurors he could see, Harry moved towards his office.

He had just settled behind his desk and spread open several files when there was a knock on the door.

Durkheim poked his head inside.

"Chief? Hope this isn't a bad time?"

"No, not at all," Harry said, waving him inside. "I'm surprised to see you here, George. I thought you had the weekend off?"

"You said I could work this weekend and take Thursday and Friday off for my sister Emilie's wedding?"

"Oh, right. Of course," Harry replied, not really remembering. "So what's the matter?"

Durkheim, looking rather sheepish, produced a large package from behind his back. It was a rectangular box that appeared to have been hastily rewrapped in its original parcel paper. The box had been blasted by several spells, leaving several large pockmarks

along the side. Harry thought he could make out Muggle stamps along the top.

"What's that?" he asked, curious.

"Well, you know how you had Counselor Granger's personal mail redirected to the AD?" Durkheim said, awkwardly holding the package under one arm.

"Yes."

Harry had done this in order to intercept any future death threats directed towards Hermione.

"This package arrived for the Counselor early this morning," Durkheim continued, "and I'm afraid one of the Aurors thought it was suspicious—likely never seen Muggle post before—and well, he opened it and realized it was just a package from the Counselor's mother..."

"Hermione's mother?" Harry repeated.

"Yes, I think so. At least, there was no dark enchantment or threat inside the package. We were able to ascertain that much at least ..."

Harry wanted to laugh looking at the mangled parcel. Instead, he merely smiled.

Durkheim cleared his throat. "So, should I deliver this to Counselor Granger?"

"No," Harry replied quickly. "I'll give it to her. I'm seeing her in a few hours. Just put it on the couch."

Durkheim did as he was instructed and quickly exited the office.

Harry chuckled softly to himself, shaking his head. He settled behind his desk once more, ready to spend the next hour pouring over his files.

A minute later, however, he found himself staring at the box.

A package from Hermione's mum.

Harry supposed Hermione's birthday wasn't so long ago—it could be a belated birthday present. Yet, somehow he didn't think so. He knew Hermione's mum quite well and Elaine Granger was simply not the type to send a belated gift to anyone, let alone her only child.

Harry stared at the parcel a moment longer before he decided.

It wouldn't hurt to have a look. It's not like she'll notice I've touched it. Not when it's already so beaten up.

He pushed back his chair. Harry walked to the couch, and sitting down, pried open the lid.

A jumper, loosely wrapped in blue tissue paper, fell into Harry's hands. It was a rich cream color with a cable-knit pattern. By its size, Harry could tell it was for Hermione.

Disinterested now, he began to replace the jumper when he heard the crinkle of paper on paper. Lifting the sweater again, he saw an equally blue envelope lying at the bottom of the box. Hermione's name was on the front.

Hesitantly, Harry picked it up and flipped it over in his hand.

It had already been opened, he noticed, likely by one of the Aurors.

He lifted the fold of the envelope, strangely captivated by the white Muggle stationery peeking through. Glancing involuntarily around the room, he freed the letter.

It was long, Harry immediately noticed. Three sheets of paper front and back. Mrs. Granger had similar handwriting to the fine, looping script of her daughter...

Skimming through it briefly, unsure what he was looking for, Harry found that Mrs. Granger mostly wrote about the news relating to the Granger household—the sweater had been a birthday gift from a distant aunt, Hermione's father's retirement party was scheduled for next June, Mrs. Granger needed Hermione to bring her a few more Knuts so she could continue to receive the Daily Prophet...

But, near the end of the letter, Harry caught sight of his own name...

I'm glad to hear you're managing so well with your security detail, Hermione. I know for someone as independent as you, it's difficult to hand over your security to complete strangers. But, you must realize your own limitations. Harry wouldn't have given you those Aurors if he didn't absolutely think you needed them, would he? This is his area of expertise after all. Wasn't he the only one who ever made better marks than you in Defense Against the Dark Arts? (I hope you're still not holding a grudge about that!) But, he cares for you terribly, dear, so please don't make him worry.

Harry smirked, a rush of appreciation for Mrs. Granger flooding through him. He would love to see Hermione's face when she read those last few lines...

Perhaps her brows would knit together. She would roll her eyes and shake her head, her soft curls sweeping across her face...

Harry blinked.

He carefully slipped the paper back into the envelope and, removing his wand, perfectly resealed the letter. He cast a strong Anti-Detection Spell along the outside so Hermione would never know it had been tampered with, unless she knew an incredibly obscure counter-charm. He replaced the letter below the jumper and sealed the box.

After finishing this, Harry slowly walked back towards his desk, lost in thought.

He laid his fingertips on the desk and stared at the grain of the wood for what felt like a very long time.

What had he just been thinking? Why had he been thinking about Hermione like that? Hadn't he just promised to make a conscious effort to stop obsessing over her? And here he was imagining her reaction to a letter...

Had he been doing that his whole life? You know, thinking of her constantly like that? Sure...he thought about Hermione a lot, even before the whole mess with the snogging started. But why wouldn't he? Hermione was his best friend. He was constantly evaluating his thoughts and actions through the lens of her eyes.

Harry sighed and moved to sit behind his desk.

I've known her for twenty-six years, he thought resolutely. For at least twenty-five of those years, I've considered her only a friend, right? It shouldn't be hard to start thinking of her like that again. It'll just take a bit of practice. Things will return to normal soon enough. And when they do, I'll be much... happier...

Yet, Harry did not feel particularly happy.

Even his most mundane thoughts and actions invariably seemed to lead to Hermione. Considering this, how was he to create some distance between himself and her, the distance he needed to make his life comprehensible again? The distance he needed reignite his feelings for Ginny?

I will be detached, not rude, he decided. I'll avoid situations where I get too close to her. I'll listen to her, but I'll keep her separate from my own emotions. It's the only way this is going to work. If-If I do it right, she won't notice anything's different at all.

In Harry's mind, his friendship with Hermione only needed to be reset.

Those more intimate thoughts that had plagued his mind for the last month would have to be forgotten.

Lines that had been physically and mentally crossed would be redrawn.

Everything would go back to how it once was. Starting this afternoon.

At exactly noon, Harry arrived outside Hermione's office door.

The Head Office of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement appeared to be completely empty—all the barristers gone for the weekend, save Hermione.

He took a steadying breath. Haltingly, he knocked.

Distance. Detachment.

Inside, he found Hermione ready to leave. She was closing her attaché.

"Hey," she called out, beaming as she caught sight of him.

Without his consent, Harry's eyes swept over her.

She was casually dressed, a blouse made of some light blue floaty material and dark jeans. The blouse's neckline had a slight V-shape, beautifully offsetting Hermione's pale skin. It was there Harry saw his diamond necklace resting in the graceful hollow of her collarbones, above a subtle rise of her breasts.

He swallowed.

"Hi," he said somewhat tersely.

She gestured to the box in Harry's arms. "What's that?"

"Oh, your mum...package," Harry mumbled.

"What?"

"Your mum sent you a package," Harry repeated more audibly. "Was picked up by the Aurors by mistake. I'm sorry they opened it, but...there you are..."

Hermione looked at him strangely. Then, she laughed.

"All right, just put it on my desk."

Harry picked his way over to her, sidestepping several large stacks of documents, rolls of parchment, and intimidatingly large law books.

He slid the badly bruised parcel towards her on her desk.

Hermione suppressed a grin.

"My poor mum," she said teasingly. "If she knew what had happened to this..."

Harry smiled automatically, and then caught himself.

He stepped away from the desk.

"Well, yeah...like I said, sorry about that. They thought it looked like a threat. But everything is fine inside."

Hermione nodded, her attention on the box.

She revealed her wand. Instantly, the box's lid flew open and she removed the jumper.

"Well, that's nice," she said absently, briefly running her hand over the fabric.

Her eyes spotted the letter and she smiled.

Yet, a second later, Harry saw her grin falter.

She flipped the letter over in her hand, as though weighing it. Then, her eyes flashing to him, she smiled dangerously.

"You open this?" she asked, waving the letter slightly in his face. It sounded like an accusation more than a question.

Harry only stared at her.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, and picking up her wand again, she mumbled under her breath. The letter vibrated in her hand. Harry cringed. She had cast just the right spell to tell whether the letter had been opened.

Of course she would.

She looked at him again. "Harry," she said more dangerously. "You read this, didn't you?"

Harry grinned somewhat sheepishly, forgetting himself. He ran a hand through his hair.

"Yeah, but to be fair...I didn't open it," he said defensively. "It was opened by mistake and I just...happened to read it before I closed it up again."

Hermione smirked, tearing open the letter. "Uh huh. And what did you think?"

Harry laughed. "Well...I like your mum."

She looked at him curiously as she removed the sheaves of paper. She grinned widely at its length and quickly swept her eyes over the pages.

When she came to the portion about him, she reacted exactly as Harry had predicted—her fine eyebrows crinkled slightly, she rolled her eyes and shook her head, her curls dancing...

Harry blinked.

"I see what you mean," she said tartly, shoving the letter back into the envelope. "You've always been her favorite, so I guess it's no surprise she'd take your side..."

"Hermione..." Harry said warningly.

"I'll read the rest later," she said innocently. "Are you ready to leave?"

He hesitated, but nodded in assent.

She moved to the side of the desk.

Harry noticed she wasn't wearing shoes. A pair of ankle boots had been kicked off where Harry now stood.

Without warning, Hermione came to stand beside him and bent down to slip on one of the shoes. Her other hand reached for his arm to steady herself.

Distance! Detachment! Harry's brain bellowed at him.

But another part of Harry's mind...well, that part liked the look of her creamy hand on his black jacket. The warm pressure of her palm. And if he tilted his head just so...he could see down her blouse and catch the briefest glimpse of her full and lovely breasts...

Harry's snatched his arm away and Hermione tilted sideways, catching herself.

"Eh!" she cried, looking up at him alarmed. "What's the matter?"

Harry coughed and took several steps back.

"Er...sorry, just an itch," he mumbled, reaching to rub the spot where Hermione's hand had rested moments before.

Hermione looked at him wearing only one shoe.

For one terrifying moment, Harry thought she knew everything – what he was trying to do, his plan to distance himself, his complete inability to treat her normally...

But, that moment passed.

Hermione looked down and slipped on her other shoe, this time using the desk for support.

When she finished, she gave him a cheerful look. Yet, it didn't seem to reach her eyes.

"Ready?" she asked.

Harry nodded again.

He opened the door for her and they walked back towards the lifts.

They remained silent the entire way.

Very much unlike the Ministry, St. Mungo's was humming with activity.

Families were taking advantage of the weekend to visit loved ones in the magical hospital, and thus the whole lobby was filled with the sound of children's laughter and the gentle buzz of gossiping adults. In their lime green robes, Healers were striding importantly down the corridors.

In the mass of people, no one saw Harry and Hermione arrive.

Silently, Hermione grabbed Harry's hand. She glanced at him sharply and pulled him forward. Somehow, without her saying a word, Harry understood that she would not tolerate him pulling his hand from hers again.

So, he let himself be dragged towards the Inquiries Desk, lost in the warring emotions of indignation and grim satisfaction.

"Hello," said Hermione brightly to the witch behind the desk. "Hermione Granger and Harry Potter for Healer Waltham. He's expecting us."

The woman did a double take at the mention of their names.

"Yes, Counselor," she said hastily. "I'll inform him that you've arrived. If you and Chief Potter would just wait in the lobby..."

Hermione shook her head. "If it's all right, I think we'll just head up to the Thickey Ward. Would you please tell Healer Waltham to meet us there?"

Before the woman could respond, Hermione had dragged Harry away again, pulling him towards the lifts. Harry glanced back at the receptionist, who's expression was somewhere between confusion and perturbation.

"What was that for?" Harry asked, as Hermione finally released his hand as the lift doors closed. "Why not go to Healer Waltham's office?"

"Honestly," said Hermione curtly as she punched the button for the fourth floor, "are we here to see the Camerons or not?"

"Well, I guess. But, I don't see the problem in going to his office first..."

"Harry," Hermione said, looking at her feet. "I saw the Camerons a few days ago. They haven't been told anything about their condition in weeks...and they've asked. The Healers...well, they don't seem to think it's necessary to keep the Camerons informed, as if they wouldn't understand because they're non-magical." She sighed as the lift came to a halt. "No. Healer Waltham is going to tell me about

their conditions in their presence. It's the only way they'll get an honest answer about what's happening to them."

The lift came to a halt.

Hermione, her face set, stepped into the hallway. Harry followed silently after.

The Thickey ward was filled with soft grey light from an overcast sky. As always, three lone patients occupied one far end of the hall. The Camerons lived behind a partition.

It was towards this barrier Hermione strode. She separated the curtains with her hand, Harry beside her.

"Miss Hermione!" someone cried out in a voice so full of rapture Harry was momentarily shocked. "You're back!"

A second later, Duncan Cameron had flown into Hermione's outstretched arms. She laughed.

"Oh, Duncan!" she exclaimed. "It's good to see you too!"

The twelve-year-old, peering out under Hermione's arm, spotted Harry.

"And Mr. Potter?" Duncan said, smiling ecstatically. "You're here too?"

Harry nodded, leaning down to briefly embrace the boy as he detached himself from Hermione. "Of course, mate. It's good to see you again."

The boy pulled back from Harry, beaming.

Harry saw Hermione moving quickly towards the other two beds, where Mr. and Mrs. Cameron were sitting.

Someone tugged on his sleeve.

"Er...Mr. Potter?" Duncan said quietly, unable to meet Harry's eyes. "Is...Is Lily here?"

"Lily?" repeated Harry, momentarily confused. As Duncan's cheeks turned a deep crimson, Harry recalled the blooming feelings between Duncan and his only daughter. Harry did his best to restrain his annoyance.

"No, sorry. She's not here."

Duncan released his hold on Harry's arm.

Harry almost wanted to take it back, to summon Lily to St. Mungo's at once. Duncan looked rather too much like a kicked dog.

Harry cleared his throat, looking for Hermione again.

She was now sitting on Mrs. Cameron's bed, holding the older woman's hand. They were actually having a pleasant conversation it seemed—something Harry had yet to experience with Theresa Cameron...

Their reunion was short lived, however.

Healer Waltham, ginger and stocky in stature, appeared at that moment from behind the partition.

"Counselor Granger," he called, briefly nodding to Harry.

Hermione got up from the bed and came towards them both.

"Healer Waltham. It's nice to see you again, sir."

Harry could tell she didn't think so.

"Might I ask we take our meeting in my office," the Healer began tersely. "It'll be much quieter there and I can offer you and Chief Potter some tea and..."

"That won't be necessary," Hermione said flatly. "It's not very loud here. I'd like the Camerons to hear the latest on their conditions as well."

Healer Waltham looked uncomfortable. His eyes fell on Duncan, who was still standing by Harry's side.

The Healer lowered his voice, glancing at Hermione. "Counselor...I did not call you here for a medical update on the Camerons' conditions...that remains quite unchanged. I called you here to discuss arrangements pertaining to their... future care."

Hermione stared at the Healer for a long moment. "I don't see why such matters cannot be discussed in front of them. Have they no say in what is to happen to them?"

"Please, Ms. Granger," the Healer said, almost begging. "It's not something I can so readily discuss...in front of...Muggles. Please, would you just come to my office? I will explain everything there."

Hermione, faltering, shared a glance with Harry.

He raised his eyebrows, giving his grudging consent.

She sighed.

"That's fine, Healer Waltham. But, I must insist that after our meeting you personally give an update to the Camerons regarding their medical care. They've been horribly deprived by your staff..."

"I understand," he said, cutting her off. "If you'll just follow me."

As the Healer turned his back, Hermione looked worriedly at Harry. He felt that strong, almost primal urge to comfort her. His hand ached to touch her.

Yet, he quickly quashed it.

Harry and Hermione followed Healer Waltham out of the ward and down a long hallway. They reached a particular corridor lined with offices, and stopping before one of the doors, the Healer escorted them inside.

It was almost too clean, Harry instantly thought. White-tiled walls and a grey, concrete floor. The desk was brushed, black metal. A single vase of white lilies sat beneath the only window in the room.

The Healer summoned two chairs and moved to sit behind his desk. Hermione glanced at Harry again before they both sat down.

"So," Hermione began slowly, "you said you called me to talk about the Camerons' future care? Does this mean there has been absolutely no improvement to their memories?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm sorry, Counselor," the Healer said, though he did not look particularly remorseful, "we have tried everything possible, and we remain hopeful that we may yet find a solution, but at the moment there has been no improvement. At least we can take solace in the fact that their condition has not worsened..."

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Hermione's jaw tighten.

"Worsened?" she repeated coolly. "Theresa Cameron still cannot remember her son, nor Walter Cameron his occupation. Nicole Cameron has only woken up twice in the six weeks she has been here. And you say at least their condition has not worsened?"

The Healer pursed his lips.

"Well, that is why I have called you in, Counselor. Mind you, I was not required to do so, but I thought you might want to be informed before it happened."

"Before what happened?" Hermione asked tightly.

The Healer looked surprised she did not know.

"Oh, simply that Duncan Cameron will be Obliviated today."

Harry's eyes widened. Hermione reacted first.

"What?" she breathed, her fingers tightening around the edge of the chair.

"He is to be Obliviated," Waltham repeated quite simply. "His memories pertaining to his time in St. Mungo's are to be erased. Unfortunately, this means we must also erase the reason he came here and some additional information will be added to his memories in order to ease his transition into the Muggle world...Considering that Duncan's memories may be of some relevance to your case against Theo Callahan, I thought it best you be informed before the procedure," the Healer finished.

A ringing silence met his words.

"Am I to understand, Healer Waltham," said Hermione, her voice dangerously soft, "that Duncan came to this hospital to have his memory restored...and now you are telling me that it is to be destroyed completely?"

Waltham shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Duncan's case is most unusual, Counselor," the Healer said. "Under normal circumstances no Muggle child without a familial connection to the magical world would be allowed to have knowledge of wizardry for over six weeks. Regarding your case, he has already divulged everything he knows. And among his family members, his memory remains the most functional and intact. There is simply no reason why he needs to stay here..."

"Of course there's a reason!" Hermione cried vehemently, her face red. "His parents are here, aren't they? That's your fucking reason! Is it now St. Mungo's policy to separate children from their parents—particularly when those parents are still receiving medical care? No, he absolutely cannot be taken away. Not while they're alive. Not while they still remember him. Where would he go otherwise?"

Harry briefly closed his eyes. He hadn't seen Hermione this worked up in quite some time.

The Healer cleared his throat. Harry didn't blame him for looking down at his desk and beginning to fiddle with the papers there. Anyone in direct view of Hermione's expression would have done the same.

"A place has been found for him, Ms. Granger...I was just about to say," he grumbled. "Theresa Cameron has an older brother who could take the boy. The man lives here in London...I have a write-up on his situation."

Waltham removed a sheaf of parchment from a drawer in his desk.

Hermione seized it.

Harry watched as Hermione's face became even redder. There seemed to be a distinct crackle of energy in the air...

"Is this a joke?" she spat, lowering the parchment slowly. "You wouldn't give a dog to a man like this."

She thrust the parchment into Harry's hands. He was about to skim over it himself when Hermione began outlining the more important details.

"Family relation or not, this man lives in the East End," said Hermione accusingly. "Perhaps you're not aware that this is the most dangerous area of London? He's a bachelor, with two marriages lasting no longer than two years each? And what's this?" she asked angrily, snatching the parchment out of Harry's hands again and shoving it under Waltham's nose. "He served a four-year prison term for selling drugs? Oh yes, sounds like the perfect place for a twelve-year-old boy."

Healer Waltham leaned back, raising his palms.

"This is the only relative the Office of Wizard-Muggle Exchange could identify. Once the boy's uncle is informed Duncan needs a new home, he will surely take Duncan in and care for him accordingly."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Yes, because that worked so well in Harry's case," Hermione said, waving a hand in Harry's direction.

Harry blinked, surprised he had been brought into this conversation.

Waltham cringed slightly, failing to meet Harry's eyes. Ever since the first full-length, unauthorized biography about Harry was published in 1998, the abuse and neglect Harry had suffered with the Dursleys had become popular knowledge.

"That's...hardly relevant," the Healer mumbled.

Harry had to agree. He was happy to keep his childhood out of this, but he also had to admit Duncan's uncle sounded dangerous...the boy could not stay with him.

"And I suppose," Hermione continued, her face entering a new shade of crimson, "you'll make Duncan an orphan when you Oblivate him, will you? You'll tell him his parents and sister died in a car wreck or something? Have you any idea of the emotional strain that puts on someone?"

"Memory charms can always be removed, Counselor," said the Healer weakly. "Should the family's condition improve, Duncan will be reunited with them immediately."

"And when will that be?" Hermione shot back, livid. "In two weeks? A month? A year? Ten years? You'd put him through the additional trauma of finding out his parents are alive and that he had been separated from them against his will?"

Harry felt a strange pull in his stomach as he watched Hermione's face. There was a near-invisible sheen over her eyes, as though she were on the verge of tears.

He suddenly realized this subject was very personal for Hermione. After the death of Voldemort, Hermione had removed the eleven-month Memory Charm she had placed on her parents for their own protection. When Hermione's mother found out what her daughter had done, she did not speak to Hermione for several weeks. Harry knew it was one of the most difficult times in Hermione's life.

Harry cleared his throat.

"Healer Waltham," he said as calmly as possible. Hermione turned to stare at him, blinking quickly. "I think what Counselor Granger is trying to say is that given Duncan's parents are still alive and well—despite the fact that his mother occasionally forgets him—it would be cruel to separate Duncan from them. Surely there's no better place for a child than with his parents?"

"I understand your concern," Waltham said, looking anywhere but Hermione, "but this is out of my hands. Duncan simply cannot stay. Besides the drain on hospital resources...surely you have realized that Duncan is not thriving here? St. Mungo's is no place for a Muggle child. He needs to attend a school, to be around others like himself. And since the Ministry cannot risk releasing Duncan to the Muggle world un-Oblivated, we have to do something..."

Hermione became still at his words, her expression becoming troubled rather than angry.

Healer Waltham was right. Duncan may be with his family now, but he was not thriving. The boy was encaged within the walls of a hospital that detested his presence. As such, Duncan was unable to make friends, unable to play—every moment of his life defined by his inferiority...well, Harry knew what that was like.

Watching Hermione, he wasn't exactly sure what impelled him to speak—perhaps it was the way her small fist slowly unclenched itself, or the defeated look in her eyes. Either way, speaking felt right.

"I'll pay for Duncan's upkeep," Harry said.

They both turned to stare at him.

"Er, that's certainly...generous, Chief Potter," the Healer said after a moment. "But, I don't think you know what you'd be..."

"No," Hermione interrupted, turning to face Waltham. "No. I will pay for Duncan's expenses."

"Hermione," Harry protested.

Hermione gave him a small smile as she reached across the space between them and placed her hand on his knee.

"No, I will. No arguments."

Harry fell silent, wondering if he should insist. He stared at her creamy hand, feeling as though he was supposed to remember to do something...

Waltham watched the exchange with a furrowed brow. This was not going the way he had anticipated.

"Look—Chief Potter, Counselor Granger," the Healer said, exasperated. "I understand that you both want to help the boy, but he needs more than financial support right now. He needs to go to school. He cannot attend a Muggle school as he is now. There

would be too much temptation for him to tell his Muggle friends about what he has seen here, violating the Statute of Secrecy..."

Harry highly doubted Duncan would tell anyone about the wizarding world. Yet, the law was sacrosanct. Even as head of the Auror Department, Harry could see no way that Duncan could attend a Muggle school with his current memories intact.

"What about home-schooling?" Hermione suggested eagerly. "His mother can't teach him because of her...memory block...regarding Duncan, but what about his father?"

Healer Waltham was shaking his head.

"Mr. Cameron's intellectual faculties were the most severely damaged of the four. His failure to remember his occupation stems from a larger inability to use his higher-level thinking. He would hardly make for an appropriate teacher."

She turned to Harry.

"Is there anyone we know?" she asked him urgently. "Someone who could tutor Duncan? Molly is too old to manage teaching a twelve-year-old...My parents are far too busy, and aren't properly trained. Is there anyone else?"

Harry wracked his mind, trying to think of any acquaintance who had the time and ability to teach Duncan. No obvious answer came.

He shook his head slowly. Hermione looked down at her hands, her brow furrowed in deep concentration.

After a moment, she finally spoke.

"I'll—I'll do it," she said. "I'll teach him myself. I can make some time after work...or maybe early in the mornings..."

This time, Harry reached out his hand. He covered hers.

"Hermione, love," he said smiling, "you don't have the time. You're running ragged as it is preparing for the case. You can't take on the commitment it would take to teach Duncan properly..."

"I could do it," said Hermione softly, desperately. "It's not...I could. He's right. Duncan has to go to school..."

"It's not up to you to do everything," Harry replied just as softly. "There'll be another solution."

Hermione held tightly to his hand, looking back at him with large eyes. He inherently understood she wanted to know what that other solution was.

Healer Waltham cleared his throat.

"You see," he said, somewhat smugly, "there truly is no other option than Obliviation at this point. I'm sorry, but releasing him to the Muggle world and a Muggle school with his memories intact is simply out of the question..."

"So what if we don't send him to a Muggle school..." Harry interrupted.

"What?" Hermione and Healer Waltham asked simultaneously.

"You're saying he cannot be released to the Muggle world for school...so what if we keep him in this world? What if we send him to the Agrippa School?"

Two sets of wide eyes stared back at him—Hermione with a look of sheer adoration, Healer Waltham with a look of sheer disbelief.

"I'm sorry...what?" the Healer asked, stunned and staring at Harry as though he had gone mad. "The wizard preparatory school? You want to send Duncan there?"

"Yes," said Harry simply.

The Cornelius Agrippa School for Elementary Wizardry in London was the same school Lily and Hugo currently attended. All of Harry and Hermione's children had attended the prestigious academy before they left for Hogwarts. These days, most magical families chose to send their children to preparatory schools rather than having them home-schooled, and Agrippa was one of the most difficult schools to get into.

"A Muggle in a wizarding school? Why don't you just send him to Hogwarts then?" the Healer cried, throwing up his hands. "I've never heard of such a thing! It's ridiculous, preposterous—"

"It's perfect," Hermione said, clutching Harry's hand so tightly he was beginning to lose feeling in his fingers. "The deputy headmistress is a friend of mine. Surely, she could pull some strings so that Duncan could enroll. Most of the classes are basic math, reading, history...he could be exempted from the more magically focused classes. There's one problem though," she said, thinking fast, "Duncan is twelve years old. Agrippa only teaches up to age eleven..."

"Yes, so you see...quite impossible," the Healer blurted.

"Well, it shouldn't really matter, should it?" Harry said evenly, glaring at the man. "Duncan lived in a rural area before the attack, right? He might have been receiving a good education or he might not. Either way, isn't the most important thing that he remain in school, have a regular schedule again...?"

"Yes," said Hermione, agreeing. "Agrippa is very advanced. If we placed Duncan in the highest class he would likely be at his level, wouldn't he? I can discuss this with Elda Stalk, the deputy headmistress. I'm sure it will be no problem..."

"Counselor," Waltham protested, "I already have the order for Duncan's Obliviation. It's signed and scheduled to happen this evening at four. I don't think..."

"Who signed it?" Hermione demanded, using her most disarmingly commanding voice.

"Well, I did..." said Waltham weakly, "and the case officer at the Office of Wizard-Muggle Exchange."

"Who is?"

Waltham glanced at the parchment. "Xavier Dodderidge."

Hermione pursed her lips slightly.

Dodderidge was a high official in the Office of Wizard-Muggle Exchange, but Harry had never understood how the man got into the

field of Muggle relations. Though Harry did not know him well, he could tell the man had no inherent interest in Muggles and perhaps viewed his office as a mere stepping stone to a more prestigious Ministry position.

A moment later, Hermione smiled sweetly at Waltham.

"Well," she said silkily, "you certainly agree that we should postpone his Obliviation, don't you? You'll reconsider the order, of course."

"Counselor...I,"

"What's the problem, Fredrick?" asked Hermione with false innocence. "Duncan will receive an education, his expenses will be paid for, and most importantly he will be with his family. Surely this is the better option than convincing him that he's an orphan and sending him to a drug dealer?"

"Well, of course..." the Healer mumbled. "But...but Duncan's place at Agrippa is not assured. And there's Mr. Dodderidge..."

"If I can ensure he has a place at the school and Mr. Dodderidge agrees, you will rescind the order?"

"That seems..."

"Surely you can have no objection then," said Hermione authoritatively while crossing her arms, "unless you have some personal reason for wanting to remove Duncan?"

Waltham's brow furrowed. "No, not at all...the boy is a nuisance, but..."

"Then it will be a good thing to have him away from the hospital eight hours a day, wouldn't it?" Hermione reasoned brightly.

The Healer shrugged. "But the deadline, Counselor. It's a mere three hours away..."

Hermione bit her lip slightly, Harry watching her closely. She glanced at him before she spoke. "I will be back before four."

With that, Hermione stood up, Harry immediately following suit.

"But, but...Counselor," Waltham called as Harry and Hermione walked towards the door.

"Before four!" Hermione replied cheerily to the obviously disgruntled Healer. She took Harry's hand, swung open the door, and strode into the hallway.

As soon as they were out of the office, and Harry had shut the door behind him, Hermione's face fell. She took a few steps down the corridor and turned to face him.

Harry came up beside her, worried by her expression.

"Harry," she whispered urgently. "I need you to stay with Duncan."

"What?"

"Shh," Hermione hissed, glancing down the hallway. "You heard him. Waltham has the order. There's nothing to stop him from Obliviating Duncan right now except us...and I have to go."

"Go where?"

She shushed him again. "Weren't you listening?" she said in her most Hermione-like tone. "I've got to convince Xavier Dodderidge to rescind the order, and that means I need to meet with Elda Stalk to make sure Duncan can be admitted to Agrippa. So I need you to stay. Please?"

Hermione's eyes were filled with such intensity and desperation that Harry's immediate impulse was to agree to whatever she wanted, but something held him back—perhaps that niggling promise he had made to keep Hermione separate from his emotions...

"What am I supposed to do then, Hermione?" Harry whispered back sharply. "Am I supposed to stop the Healers from Obliviating him? What do you want me to do? Fight them off?"

"Precisely," said Hermione, failing to detect his sarcasm. "It hopefully won't come to that...but stall, delay them. Just spend the day with Duncan. If you're with him, they won't dare touch him."

Harry wanted to roll his eyes, but resisted.

"How long is this supposed to take then?" Harry asked.

"I'll leave for Elda's house right now—explain the situation," Hermione said, twisting her fingers around themselves. "I don't think she'll take too much convincing. All I need right now is a verbal promise that Duncan will be admitted. Then, I'll head to the Ministry."

"Will Dodderidge be there?"

"I don't know," Hermione replied, considering this for the first time. Sometimes she failed to realize that most people did not work through the weekends like she did. "Someone at the Office will know where he is. Perhaps at the Quidditch Pitch...that match is today, right?"

Harry cringed, his stomach sinking.

The match.

How could he stay here in the hospital with Duncan? He had promised Ginny he'd come to the match. He had to go.

He opened his mouth to interrupt Hermione.

"Hermione, I..." he began, looking at her desperately, hating he would have to cause her more worry.

"So all in all...maybe two hours? Plenty of time, don't you think?" Hermione was saying, looking up at him.

Harry felt his resolve leave him like water slipping through his hands.

He looked away from her.

"Two hours? You promise?" If he was lucky, he could catch the tail end of the match.

"Yes."

Then, gazing at him strangely, she picked up his hand without warning.

"Harry," she breathed, squeezing his fingers and looking at him with adoration yet again. "You are wonderful. Thank you for thinking of Agrippa. I don't know if...in my state I would have thought of it...and Duncan...well, he just can't leave here...his parents...his sister."

Hermione's free hand fell to her side and she lowered her head.

Without a thought, as though it were the most natural thing, Harry reached down and captured her other hand, entwining his fingers with hers.

"Hey," he said gently, "everything's going to be fine. Go and talk to Elda and Dodderidge. Then come back. I'll look after Duncan. There's no need for you to worry."

Hermione did not look up. Instead, she leaned into him and let her head fall against his chest. Instinctually, Harry released her hands and wrapped his arms around her. As he encircled her in his arms, he realized what was happening and that he would have to stop it...

...but...but... it felt so nice...

She was so warm, her skin so soft under his hands. And she was nuzzling his chest adorably, her hair smelling like lilies and new books—she smelt like Hermione. And wasn't that nice? What was wrong with that?

Before Harry could come to a decision about what to do, Hermione leaned back and disentangled herself. She trailed a hand down his arm and gripped his hand.

"I better go," she said softly. "Two hours."

"Two hours."

After giving it one final squeeze, she released his hand. She turned on the spot, and was gone.

He stared at the spot where Hermione had vanished before Harry turned in the direction of the Thickey Ward.

If Hermione was going to be running around London to save Duncan from expulsion from the wizarding world, he supposed the least he could do was perform his baby-sitting function well.

Harry tried not to think about the match...

Ginny was probably wondering where he was...or maybe she wasn't. If the match was interesting, she might be too caught up in following the commentary and pouring through statistical data to notice his absence.

As Harry thought this, he pushed his way through the swinging double doors of the ward. That strange, rare sound met his ears.

Duncan was laughing.

Slightly bemused, Harry moved towards the partition, and separating the curtains, peered inside.

Duncan was sitting on his bed with an older man Harry didn't know.

Duncan's sister, Nicole, was still unconscious on the bed next to her brother—her skin paler and slightly blotchy, as though she had not been turned over in quite some time. Harry swept his eyes towards the other end of the room. Mrs. Cameron was doing needlework in her bed. Mr. Cameron was sitting by the television holding a book. It appeared to be another crime novel, Harry noticed, but Mr. Cameron's eyes were not moving. He was wearing a vacant expression.

Harry stepped into the room and Duncan immediately noticed his arrival.

"Mr. Potter," Duncan called out cheerily, sliding off the bed. The other man remained seated.

As the boy ran towards Harry, he looked back towards the curtains.

"Where's Miss Hermione?" he asked, not bothering to cover up his disappointment at finding Harry alone.

Harry smiled slightly. How could he even begin to explain what Hermione was doing for Duncan right now?

"She's running an errand," Harry said easily. "She'll be back in a few hours. What are you up to, then? Did I tell you I brought you a new book?"

Duncan immediately brightened.

"Really! Oh, thanks so much Mr. Potter. I'd finished Miss Hermione's books last week and..." The boy looked guiltily towards his bedside table. Harry spied two or three large medical tomes stacked under the lamp.

Harry laughed, reaching into his cloak. "I'm sorry I've only brought one then. But at least it's about something you've never read about..."

Harry pulled out a shrunken version of Quidditch Through the Ages and quickly removed his wand.

"Engorgio!" Harry said and the book grew to its appropriately mammoth size.

Duncan tried not to stare as Harry replaced his wand. He took the book happily.

"Quid-ditch?" he said curiously, reading the title. "I think Lily said something about it...about the brooms and stuff."

"Yes. It's basically our version of football or rugby. A very popular magical sport," Harry said, smiling. He strangely liked explaining such perfunctory things to Duncan—it was like explaining a cultural quirk to a foreigner.

At that moment, the man sitting on Duncan's bed stood up, the bed springs squeaking. He walked towards Harry and Duncan.

The man glanced at Harry before he knelt down to address the boy.

"I had better go, Duncan," he said kindly. "Healer Belby is leading a seminar in the Brain Ward."

"Oh," Duncan said quietly. "Okay."

The man ruffled Duncan's hair and glanced at Harry again. But, he stopped—and why wouldn't he? —Harry was staring at him as though he had sprouted an extra head.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quickly. "But, are you...are you a doctor?"

"Yes?" the man replied, a little alarmed by Harry's disquiet.

"A real doctor? Like a Muggle doctor?"

Again, Harry knew very little about Muggle health care, but the man before him was dressed very similarly to Dr. Srinivasan. The same crisp, white coat with an embroidered nametag. The same air of cleanliness and kindness.

Yet, it created such cognitive dissonance in Harry's mind to see a Muggle doctor in a wizarding hospital. Amid the lime green robes of the Healers, this man must look very strange indeed.

The doctor laughed. "Yes, yes. I'm Dr. Peck. You can call me Alex." He held out his hand.

"Alex?...Alexander?" Harry asked, vaguely shaking his hand. "I read your name in the Prophet...you're one of those new Muggle doctors on that consultative fellowship?"

"Yes, I've been here just over two weeks," the doctor replied, smiling. "Met Duncan my second day...it's hard to find others likes us around here, so we stick together."

The doctor was a handsome man, slightly taller and younger than Harry. He had dark brown hair and hazel eyes set into a light olive complexion. His face was slightly distorted, however, by a hair-like scar running from under his left nostril to his lip...he must have had a cleft palate once, Harry realized. Instead of scrubs under his coat, he wore a white button down shirt tucked into grey slacks.

"This is Mr. Potter, Alex," Duncan finally piped up, perhaps having a mature premonition that an introduction was required.

"You can call me Harry."

"Harry, okay...wait...your name," Alex said, his brow furrowing. "Harry...Harry Potter? I read your name somewhere too, didn't I? Maybe in my orientation material, but that was some time ago..." His eyes widened. "My God, are you...are you the Prime Minister of Magic?"

Harry burst out laughing, which only intensified the bemused expression on the doctor's face. How nice it was that someone did not know who he was for a change!

"No, not at all!" Harry said, wiping at his eyes. "That post has been held by the same man for some twenty years. I'm an Auror, Chief of the Auror Department, actually. We're sort of like police in this world..."

"An Aur-or?" Alex repeated, not recognizing the word. "Well, all right then. But you're very famous, aren't you? There was an entire section about something relating to you, I'm sure of it...There was a war some time back, right?"

"There was a war."

The doctor's eyes widened slightly, almost like a child waiting to hear a ghost story. When Harry failed to elaborate, Alex seemed to remember himself.

He cleared his throat.

"Well, it's a pleasure," he said, holding out his hand again, which Harry took. There was a moment of awkward silence. The doctor glanced at Duncan, who seemed to have become bored with the adults' conversation and was flipping through Quidditch Through the Ages. "I'm guessing you know Duncan too?"

"Um, yes. My best friend...she's well...she's the lead counselor for Duncan's family's case," Harry said, running an agitated hand through his hair. "I'm guessing you heard what happened?"

"Bits and pieces."

"Right." He cleared his throat. "Well, I certainly don't mean to keep you, if you need to go. I'm in charge of watching Duncan for the next few hours."

"You're in charge?" the doctor asked, confused again. "Duncan needs the wizard police to watch over him?"

Harry laughed a little awkwardly. "It's a favor...for my friend."

"Who's this friend?"

"Her name is Hermione Granger...I'm sorry, Weasley...or Granger. Both are...both are used..."

"Hermione Weasley?" said Alex, this time recognition coloring his face. "I met her actually at the welcome banquet they had for us earlier this month. She's a nice woman. From what I gathered, she's one of the founders of this exchange program. So, she's pretty important too, then?"

"She's very important."

"She seemed very smart too."

"She's brilliant."

Fuck. Stop it.

"So, she has you babysit her clients, is that it? You're a good friend," said Alex with a teasing smile.

Harry laughed awkwardly yet again. "No, it's not like that. I...you see." Harry looked at Duncan again. "It's a complicated story."

The doctor slowly followed Harry's eyes to the boy.

"I understand..." He paused. "You know, I don't need to go to this seminar thing. I won't be needed, to say the least. Would you and Duncan care for a walk in the courtyard? It's a nice day, isn't it? — A little nippy, but not bad."

"Um, sure," Harry replied. "That's fine with me. Duncan?"

The boy did not look up.

"Duncan, Mr. Potter is talking to you."

No response. He was blazing through a page on the history of the Bludger.

"Duncan," Harry repeated more loudly.

No response.

Grinning slightly, Harry removed his wand.

Snap!

The book shut in Duncan's hands and zoomed towards the bedside table, landing neatly on top of a purloined pulmonary periodical.

"Oi!" Duncan cried out, looking as though he had been slapped. His eyes flashed to Harry, who was putting away his wand. "What was that for?" he demanded, his voice cracking in the higher octave.

"You're getting fresh air. Now move," Harry ordered in a tone he usually reserved for James Potter.

"But..." Duncan said, turning towards the bedside table.

"Doctor's orders," Alex added, pushing Duncan between the shoulder blades. He waved to Duncan's parents as they moved towards the curtains.

Both men, and the reluctant boy, passed through the barrier.

A chilly wind whipped through the enclosed courtyard. It was a rather large space full of stone benches and imposing busts of even more imposing medi-wizards. Highly manicured bushes lined each side of the walkway where Harry and Dr. Peck were strolling. Duncan had already climbed over the bushes and was squatting near the central fountain, examining the guppies darting around the bottom.

Harry, tucking his hands into his cloak, glanced at the doctor. His eyes were on Duncan.

"So how is it you came to know about this exchange program?" Harry asked.

"My friend, Jessica Reyes, told me about it. She was the fellow at St. Mungo's two years ago," the doctor explained. "I've been told that the first Muggle doctors in this program were all relatives of witches and wizards. I don't have any magical people in my family, so it's sort of odd I'm here...I suppose."

"Your friend was allowed to tell you about the program?" Harry asked swiftly. It sounded like a violation of the Statute of Secrecy.

"Apparently there's some clause that former fellows can nominate new recruits. So, she nominated me," Alex replied, smiling. "And then one day, there was a knock on my door and two men in cloaks asked if they could come inside. Naturally, I thought this was some sort of joke but as they kept talking...well, you can imagine..."

"What was your reaction?"

Alex laughed, remembering. "Disbelief, at first. I called them crazy. I said they should see a good doctor—someone that wasn't me—because they needed help. And then...they said they could prove it, you know? That magic was real. And of course...being the curious idiot I am, I asked for a demonstration..."

"What did they do?" Harry asked, grinning. There were only five legal demonstrations of magic for the purposes of proving the existence of wizards to Muggles. Usually, the demonstration reflected a wizard's best guess of what would most readily amaze that particular Muggle.

"Well, one of them sprouted fire in his hand...and then he froze it in place."

Two demonstrations. He must be hard to impress.

"So, what did you think?"

Alex laughed again. "Well, to be honest...after that, I just sort of stared into space for a long time. They told me they would come back later. They said if I wanted to know more, if I was interested in learning about magical medicine...then I should put an 'M' on my front door with chalk and they would come back. If I didn't, someone would come by and erase my memory of it ever happening."

"So, what did you do?"

"I did what anyone would have done! I made myself a cup of strong tea and then I ran to my neighbor's house and asked if I could borrow her son's chalk set. The cloaked men came back the next day and explained the rules...which came down to 'don't tell anyone about magic.' I agreed and here I am."

Harry nodded. Over his career, Harry had been forced to tell several Muggles about magic—usually when Muggles were the only witnesses to a magical crime—but they were always Obliviated immediately afterwards...

A door swung open at the far end of the courtyard. A Healer emerged and Harry glanced at Duncan. Harry watched the Healer pass through another exit and disappear.

"So, are you enjoying the program?" Harry asked casually.

"No. Not at all."

Harry did a double take, startled. "You're not? Why?"

Alex did not answer for a long moment. Then, he sighed. "It's somewhat hard to enjoy a program when your presence is resented at every moment."

"Resented?"

The doctor smiled wanly. "The Healers know there is absolutely no reason for me to be here. I can't perform magic. What use is it to me that I learn about a magical Brain Levitation and Rotation Procedure? I'll never be able to perform it and they'd never be allowed to perform it on a Muggle. So, what's the point?"

"Well..." Harry sputtered, feeling as though he should somehow speak in the program's defense. "Isn't it enough that you're increasing understanding? That you know this exists and all that...?"

"Yeah, but usually in an exchange program there's some sort of exchange," Alex responded bluntly, pursing his lips. "All that seems

to be coming out of this relationship is more resentment. Besides, do you see any Healers lining up to intern in Muggle hospitals?"

Harry was silent.

"No, you don't. Why would you? The Healers have made it very clear to me that they think Muggle medicine is beneath them. At best, our medicine is unnecessary. At worst, it's barbaric. No, I'm sorry, Harry. This is not an exchange program, or at least not an equal exchange."

Harry cast his eyes around the courtyard, looking anywhere but the doctor.

"If you feel that strongly about it, why haven't you told anyone? The administrators would surely let you leave the program, if you wanted..." Harry replied coolly.

"But I don't want to leave the program."

Now, Harry was confused.

"You can't seem to find any good in it..."

"There's some good," the doctor said quietly, "and it all has to do with that boy standing in the middle of the courtyard."

Harry stopped in the path, turning to stare at Duncan.

"Duncan?" Harry asked, startled. "What's he got to do with it?"

Alex stopped as well. "Well, he's why I want to stay."

"I don't understand," said Harry, staring plainly at the doctor.

"He and his family have lost their memories, correct?" Alex asked, crossing his arms and nodding towards Duncan. "From what I've gathered, something horrible was done to them, something that left them deeply scarred. They are suffering from the ramifications of a trauma they cannot remember. I'd like to change that."

Harry gazed intently at the doctor. It was the first time he'd heard someone, other than Hermione, take a proactive stance towards the Camerons' treatment.

"But their memories seem permanently damaged," Harry said slowly. "Everything they've tried hasn't worked..."

"And why hasn't it worked?"

"Well, I suppose because they're Muggles. Magic doesn't affect them the same way it does us."

"Right," Alex said, nodding. "And why is that?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "I'm not a Healer. How should I know?"

Alex grinned widely. "But that's just it—not even the Healers know."

"What?"

The doctor turned and looked down the path. He slowly began walking again, Harry following suit.

"Harry...do you happen to know anything about the origins of magic?" asked Alex quietly.

"The origins? How do you mean?" Harry replied, confused. "Like the historical origins, because yeah..."

"No. I mean the more biological origins, the physiological origins."

"Like where magic comes from in the body?" Harry guessed. "Well, I would suppose it comes from our blood..."

"Do you know for sure?"

"Well, I've never thought about it," Harry replied honestly. "We're categorized into purebloods, half-bloods, and Muggle-borns, so I reckon it has something to do with blood..."

"But all of you can perform magic equally, right?" the doctor asked quickly. He seemed exceptionally thrilled that someone was actually answering his questions. "What I mean to say is that more magical

blood does not necessarily mean you perform more or better magic, right?"

"Yes," Harry said with certainty.

Hermione's proof enough of that.

"So magic has nothing to do with the amount of magical blood you have, then?" Alex asked.

"Well, I suppose not...but you must have some, right?" Harry continued. "It's always said that Muggles are Muggles because they don't have a drop of magical blood in them..."

"Yes, that's the definition I was given too..." the doctor said lightly.

"The definition you were given?" Harry repeated. "Do you mean to say that's not the real definition?"

Harry had never heard anyone challenge the definition of a Muggle.

The doctor simply shrugged, kicking a stone with his foot. He stopped again, staring back towards the center of the courtyard.

"You know," Alex said, "I will admit that one of the best things about this fellowship is that I'm allowed access to the medical library here. I'm told this is the best library in Europe for magical medicine. And would you believe there has hardly been any work done on the biological origins of magic!"

"And by that you mean...?" Harry asked, feeling out of his depth.

"I mean, where does magic come from?" he asked, his eyes bright. "Does it come from your mind, from your blood, from both? What makes you a wizard, what makes you a Squib, and what makes you a Muggle? I have yet to stumble upon a clear explanation..."

Harry remained quiet, unwilling to interrupt Alex, who seemed lost in his own train of thought.

"The fact that magical parents tend to have magical children suggests that magic is passed on genetically. In other words, magic is hereditary," he said slowly. "But then you have some cases where

two Muggle parents produce one or more magical children—what you would call Muggle-borns?"

Hermione flashed through Harry's mind.

"So that seems to suggest," Alex continued, "that one or both of the Muggle parents was carrying a recessive gene for magic that finally manifested itself in one their children."

"Well, yeah," Harry supplied. "That's pretty intuitive."

"Yes, it is," Alex smiled slyly. "But...that would also mean the definition that Muggles are people 'without a drop of magical blood' is wrong. They do have magical blood. They have the genes. How else could they produce magical children? What they don't have is the manifestation of that gene, what we would call the ability to perform magic."

Harry processed this as best as he could. "So, you're saying that some Muggles do have magical blood because they can create magical children?"

"Yes."

"What does that all have to do with Duncan? He's not a wizard, even if he does have some magical blood in him," Harry said, perplexed. He watched as Duncan picked up a stone and hurled it into the fountain. The splash echoed off the walls.

"Everything," Alex sighed.

The confused expression did not leave Harry's face.

Alex laughed, glancing at Harry. "I guess I should have mentioned in the beginning that I'm a brain specialist in Muggle medicine. You know, I deal with head injuries and brain disorders...that sort of thing."

Harry nodded.

"So basically, if all that's keeping the Camerons from being healed is their lack of magical blood...well, from the perspective of Muggle medicine, this isn't a very big problem at all!"

"What?" Harry said, shocked yet again.

The doctor suppressed a laugh. He looked towards the fountain. "See? That's the sort of thing Healers could learn from us. That science is our magic, Muggle magic. It's changed the way we live, how long we live, how well we live. It's truly miraculous...and I think it could be miraculous in the Camerons' case."

"How do you mean?" Harry asked tiredly, hoping Alex was getting to the point.

"Well," Alex said, looking troubled, "this is actually the point where I don't know how to proceed. You see, if the problem is that the Camerons simply don't have enough magical blood to be affected by spells, then...there are a number of options."

"Like what?"

"Well, like a simple blood transfusion."

"A what?"

"A blood transfusion," Alex repeated. "We would simply replace some portion of the Camerons' blood with blood from a magical donor. And basically while the blood is still fresh within them, a Healer could try the memory restorative spells again and look for any response. This could be done several times if necessary, as long as the blood types match. The magical blood would eventually be flushed out and they would go back to their normal state."

"What's the other option?"

The doctor glanced at Harry, almost as though he were judging whether Harry could be trusted. "Well, the other option is considerably more complicated. Tell me...have you ever heard of stem cell research?"

Harry paused. The phrase seemed to trigger a faint memory within him. "I think I've heard of it."

"Well, this is a relatively new field of Muggle medicine, but things are changing very rapidly these days. Basically, stem cells are special

cells that can be designed to change conditions in the body. For example, stem cells can replace damaged heart cells in someone suffering from heart disease. The same goes for diabetes and some forms of cancer..."

Cancer, diabetes. Harry vaguely remembered these words as well. Yet, these diseases had long been eradicated from the magical world.

"For the Camerons," Alex continued slowly, "should their inability to respond to magic come from the fact that they cannot produce magical blood, then the solution is simply to allow their bodies to do so."

"And how would you do that?" Harry asked, staring fixedly at Alex.

"Well, you'd implant stems cells from the bone marrow or spleen of an adult witch or wizard into each of the Camerons. I say the bone marrow and spleen because this is where blood is created. So, it would almost be like resetting a computer chip with a new program. In this case, the new cells would only produce magical blood and then...perhaps, the Camerons could be properly treated by the Healers' spells."

The doctor's explanation was complex—bone marrow and computer chips—but through it all, Harry felt he understood what the doctor was getting at...and it shocked Harry in a way he hadn't been shocked in years, perhaps decades.

He wanted to be very clear.

"Are you saying that through this...procedure..." Harry asked slowly, allowing each word to sink into his mind, "the Camerons could start producing magical blood on their own? And then, in a sense...they would become magical?"

Alex stared at Harry for a long moment. Neither man realized they had stopped walking down the path. Duncan was still throwing rocks into the fountain.

Finally, Alex smiled. He was pleased. "You know...I've explained this procedure to maybe six Healers now and you're the first person who's caught on to what it might actually mean."

Harry was far from pleased.

"Do you realize what you're talking about?" he hissed, unconsciously lowering his voice. "You're talking about turning Muggles into wizards. Do you have any idea what that means? What that would mean to our world? Why you have no idea..."

"I have some idea," Alex countered gravely. "Two weeks of coming here is a lifetime's education. You don't need to tell me what it would mean..."

Harry gaped at the doctor's face. His mind was torn in two directions. The first, more primitive side of Harry's brain was spinning into haywire. What Alex was describing sounded like a blood supremacist's worst nightmare.

Muggles trying to turn themselves into wizards! See! They truly are trying to take over our world!

Yet, another part of Harry's brain only saw a doctor who was trying to help his patients. Unless a solution was found soon, it was all too likely that the Camerons would remain wards of Ministry forever...or worse, they would be expelled from the wizarding world unable to regain their livelihoods. As a family, they would be finished.

But the possibilities this opened up...if Muggles could become wizards, why it was like saying there was no difference between the two populations at all! To be fair, the line had always been blurry—Some Muggles had magical children, and some wizards had Squibs, who essentially became Muggles. But...but if Muggles could simply elect to become wizards, why...Harry couldn't even contemplate how that would change magical society.

Magic would no longer be a birthright...it would just be a right. That is, if Muggles didn't reject the idea of magic entirely. But...if they did accept it, or at least some Muggles accepted the idea of becoming magical...why it could mean the eventual integration of both worlds...

"This is insanity," Harry whispered, feeling like he needed to sit down.

There was a bench a few paces away and Harry quickly collapsed onto it. Alex walked more slowly towards him.

Sighing deeply, he sat down too.

"You don't need to be so worried, Harry," the doctor said calmly. "This is all theoretical...and as advanced as stem cell technology is these days, we'd essentially be starting from scratch in the Camerons' case..."

"How do you mean?" Harry asked dispiritedly, placing his head in his hands.

"I mean that the first step of implanting magical cells into a human would be identifying which genes are magical. That requires DNA mapping, and as far as I know, no witch or wizard has undergone genetic analysis. We'd possibly have to test hundreds of wizards to get an accurate read...and could we find that many people who would consent to have their blood taken by a Muggle doctor?

"Second, even if we did identify which genes were magical, there's no telling that when we implant the cells into the Camerons that the new cells would be accepted. If the cells were rejected, well, it could worsen their condition rather than improve it..."

"And finally, how am I supposed to get clearance for any of this?" asked Alex exasperatedly. "It's not like I can exactly wheel in the equipment necessary to make it happen. I'm not even a geneticist. No...just because it may be theoretically possible to improve the Camerons' situation does not mean it's practically or politically possible..."

Alex and Harry were silent for several minutes, both staring out into the center of the courtyard. Duncan was teetering along the edge of the fountain as though he were on a balance beam.

As Harry gazed at the boy...a boy who reminded him far too much of his own green-eyed son...he felt his apprehension leave him.

He began to feel some measure of the strange animus that defined Hermione's character—that force that made her fearless when it came to defending Muggles and Muggle-borns. It was the same impulse that brightened her eyes as a fourth-year when she created

S.P.E.W., the same crackle of energy he had felt when Hermione addressed Theo Callahan.

And now, Harry felt it too.

"But...if it were possible, it would help the boy? It would help them?" Harry asked quietly, watching Duncan.

"I believe it would," Alex replied seriously. "But...if anyone ever found out..."

"They won't."

"What do you mean?"

Harry leaned back and gave the doctor a half-smile.

"You were right about one thing...I am a very important person in this world."

At two, Harry, Alex, and Duncan took lunch in the hospital's Tea Room. Healers on their lunch break stared curiously at the wizarding celebrity eating with two Muggles, but Harry ignored them.

At a quarter past three, they had returned to the Thickey Ward.

Harry and Alex were talking in low voices by Nicole's bed and Duncan was sitting in his father's lap reading Quidditch Through the Ages to the older man.

It was then that a loud bang echoed off the walls—the doors to the ward had been flung open.

Harry immediately stood up, reaching for his wand.

A second later, Hermione had darted through the curtains and flung her arms around Harry.

Harry immediately gripped her shoulders, trying to steady her.

"What's wrong!" he asked, alarmed. "Are you all right?"

Hermione pulled back and Harry immediately registered that the bright sheen was back in her eyes. Yet, this time she was happy.

"Oh, Harry!" she said in an enraptured whisper by his ear. "Duncan has a place at Agrippa. He can start the week after next!"

"That's wonderful!" said Harry, sharing in her delight.

"Yes," Hermione said, disentangling herself from Harry and touching her hair. Her cheeks were red, as though she had been running. "I spoke with Elda and she agreed to place him in the highest level and excuse him from the magical preparatory classes. Hopefully, that way, he can feel like he's going to a school he's more familiar with."

"Wonderful," was all Harry could say, still gripping her hand.

Someone cleared his throat from behind the couple.

Harry turned. Alex was watching them with a strange expression.

"Oh," Harry said quickly, "this is Hermione Granger, Alex, the friend I was telling you about."

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Weasley," Alex said smiling, holding out his hand.

Hermione took it. "Thank you. It's a pleasure to see you as well. Duncan told me you had been visiting him...I'm so glad. I can't get away too often to see him..."

"I understand," Alex said, smiling kindly.

A moment of awkward silence passed. Harry and Alex shared a quick glance.

"Well," Alex said, digging his hands into his pockets, "I really should be heading back. I told my girlfriend I'd be making dinner tonight."

"Of course," Hermione replied, stepping to the side to let Alex pass.

"See you, Harry," Alex said easily, and he turned to say goodbye to Duncan. He disappeared through the partition a minute later.

Harry and Hermione were left alone.

"So, it all went well?" Harry asked, leading Hermione to the bed.

"Yes," she replied quickly, the light in her eyes dancing. "I spoke with Elda for about an hour. She was very understanding. She's a Muggle-born herself, of course. Though, she seems to think it best to keep it quiet that Duncan is joining the school. She's afraid of the reaction by some of the pureblood families...And then, I had some trouble tracking down Xavier Dodderidge..."

"Was he at the match?"

"The match?" Hermione repeated, surprised. "Well, no...that's where I thought he was too. But the pitch was empty when I got there..."

"What do you mean it was empty?" Harry asked, feeling his stomach rise in his throat.

"Oh, the match was over by the time I got there. Apparently, the Falcons' Seeker caught the Snitch an hour in. It was a big surprise."

"So...the Falcons won?" Harry asked numbly, a strange feeling of dread rising within him.

"I dunno...maybe? I think so..."

Harry overlooked Hermione's disinterest in who exactly wins national semi-finals. He stared off towards the entrance to the ward.

Ginny. She's going to kill me.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked, concern coloring her face.

"Yes, yes..." Harry replied. He turned and smiled at her, hoping it reached his eyes. "Are you ready to go home?"

"I suppose we should," said Hermione reluctantly.

She stood up and moved to say goodbye to the Camerons. Duncan seemed particularly upset she could not stay longer.

Despite his trepidation about returning home, Harry had to smile as Hermione leaned down and embraced the skinny boy. She placed a kiss on his cheek and patted his hair.

Harry said his goodbyes as well and together Harry and Hermione walked slowly out of the ward. They had walked several feet down the deserted corridor when Hermione reached out and gripped Harry's hand, bringing him to a stop.

He looked at her curiously.

She was wearing a soft smile. The immeasurable depth in her eyes.

"Thanks for coming with me," was all she said.

With that, she brought herself into Harry's arms, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist.

Over Hermione's head, Harry looked back towards the ward feeling strangely at peace. He was tired of warring with himself.

He embraced her as well, looping his own arms around her waist and laying his head on her shoulder.

He embraced her because he had always done so.

Since he was eleven, he had given himself up should Hermione choose to hug him. She usually initiated it, being the girl and all, and he had never—would never—stop her.

Because, when it came down to it...Harry felt the same relief, the same joy, the same desperation as Hermione whenever they embraced. It had always been like that.

Ten minutes later, Harry eased open the enormous front door of his home.

It was quite dark inside, the late afternoon light streaming weakly through the windows.

"Lily! Ginny!" he called out somewhat hesitantly. "You home?"

No answer came and Harry released a breath.

He was just about to step into the cloakroom when he heard a voice.

"Lily is at Mum's."

He spun on his heel. Ginny was standing near the entrance of the study.

"Oh, hey..."

Ginny stared stonily back at him, her arms crossed.

Fuck.

"Gin...I'm so sorry I missed the match," he said quickly. "I tried to leave early, but something came up. I had to stay with Duncan while Hermione ran some...errands. By the time she came back, well...I guess the match was over."

Still, Ginny did not say anything. She turned and walked back into the study.

Running an agitated hand through his hair, Harry followed after her.

"I really am sorry," he said, stepping into the dimly lit room. "So the Falcons won, then?"

Ginny came to a halt by the desk, her back still turned.

"Yes. Forty-three minutes in Jacob Turlington caught the Snitch. 200-30."

"Oh," Harry said lamely. "I see..."

"Something came for you in the post," Ginny said, turning to face him.

"Oh?"

She nodded, walking towards him. "The Muggle post."

Harry looked at her, confused. But then, she slipped a crisp, white envelope into his hands. The words Royal London Opera were written in beautiful calligraphy along the front. The letter had already been opened.

"Can you explain this for me Harry?" Ginny asked with an air of false tranquility. "Instead of going to a Quidditch match today—and a national semi-final no less—you decided to visit some Muggles with Hermione. And now, you've decided we're going to a Muggle opera?"

Harry looked down briefly. "I'm sorry...I should have told you."

"And I suppose," Ginny went on, her voice dripping with derision, "that you're doing this for Hermione's benefit again? Is that right?"

Harry couldn't say anything.

Ginny stared at him for a beat. "I just...I don't understand you, Harry. You used to like Quidditch games. You used to like going to Diagon Alley for shows and all that. But, now you're visiting Muggles in the hospital and going to these ridiculous Muggle plays?" She gaped at him. "What's wrong with you?"

"There's nothing wrong," Harry mumbled. "There's nothing wrong with going to look."

She paused. "You're doing more than looking."

"What does that mean?"

Ginny's iron gaze faltered slightly. "It means you can sleep down here tonight."

With that, Ginny strode out of the room, her heels hitting hard upon the floor.

Chapter 14: The Fear

"And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling."

-1 Corinthians 2:3

The home of Harry Potter and his family was a large estate on the outer edges of London called Clymene Court. It was the second mansion to stand on the property, the first having burnt to the ground. Though a noble Muggle family had built both houses, only wizards had occupied Clymene Court for the past two centuries. Now, every corner of the property was drenched in Unplottable and Muggle-repelling charms, much of it Harry's own creation. The manor itself stood three stories tall. The surrounding grounds included terraced gardens, a small lake, and a formidable driveway at the front of the estate. In all, there were twenty-three rooms including a ballroom, banquet hall, library, conservatory and several salons and spacious lounges. In addition to these, there were twelve bedrooms, Harry and Ginny's far and away the largest and grandest in the house. When all the children were home, four bedrooms were occupied with one room set aside for Mrs. Weasley should she wish to use it.

The remaining rooms were guestrooms.

Tonight, Harry chose the guestroom closest to his personal study on the third floor. Carrying a toothbrush, razor, and towel under his arm, he let the water run in the bathroom for several minutes, clearing out the pipes.

Then, he went down to Lily's room to kiss his daughter goodnight. She was far too consumed in recounting the Quidditch match to notice the tension in her father's face. He kissed her pale cheek after promising to take her to Diagon Alley the next day to buy Falcon memorabilia before the national final.

As Harry shut the door to her room, he caught sight of Ginny at the end of the hallway.

She spared him a glance before disappearing into their bedroom.

He thought about following after her. He could try apologizing again, or he could just tell her she was being ridiculous and insist on sleeping in his own bed...

But Harry returned to the third floor guestroom and several minutes later he was prying apart the bed's stiff, unused sheets and climbing inside.

"Nox," he mumbled, disliking the solitary tone of his voice.

Sleep would not come tonight, Harry was sure of it.

It seemed...it seemed to have all gone wrong. Less than twenty-four hours ago he had chosen to distance himself from Hermione and recommit to his wife. He had felt a sense of security in that decision, like a lost traveler who finally recognizes the path home. Yet, here he was. He had essentially spent the entire day with Hermione and things with Ginny were worse than ever...

Harry stared at the pale strip of light coming from underneath the door. It was far too quiet, the room far too cold.

He felt...afraid.

It had nothing to do with the dank quality of the room. And it wasn't because he and Ginny had never slept apart before. They had. Five or six times in their marriage, Ginny had chucked him from the bedroom and a few times Harry himself had chosen to sleep elsewhere. Nor was it because Harry knew Ginny could hold powerful grudges nor because he felt like he was truly in the wrong regarding the opera.

These were not the reasons Harry felt afraid.

No, it was something else, something Harry could not and had never been able to explain...because this fear came from a time in Harry's life when he did not have words.

This fear was Harry's first memory.

In some ways, it was the most powerful memory he had.

It came like a thunderclap. A strange, cold terror ensnared between an inexplicable sense of desperation and worthlessness. It sent tremors down his skin. It was all encompassing. It blurred the barrier between reality and imagination so that time and the intensity of his fear seemed to stretch on forever, without end.

Perhaps it was strange he should feel this way. After all, Harry was widely regarded as the most powerful wizard in the world since the death of Voldemort. What was there possibly to be afraid of?

Yet, it was still there...

That primal, instinctual fear that had defined the first ten years of his life. A fear that preceded thought itself. A fear of being wholly alone, rejected.... and unloved.

It was not that he sought to be loved by everyone. It was not that at all. It was simply that without the relationships he currently had—his wife, his children, his friends—Harry was entirely sure he could not live, could not function, could not survive.

Harry had not been lying in his fifth year when he said the only reason he had escaped Voldemort so many times was because there had always been someone to help. This pattern held true for Harry's entire life in the magical world...

The only thing that had gotten him through the search for the Horcruxes was knowing Hermione was still there, that they needed each other. The only thing that got Harry through the forest to meet his death was the blessed sensation that his mother and father stood beside him. And when Harry decided to marry Ginny, he had done so with the knowledge that he would also be marrying into her large and wonderful family. And just like everything else in the Weasley household, privacy was in short supply. To Harry, this meant loneliness would forever be kept at bay.

Yet, as Harry stared at the light from the threshold—a light that seemed to vibrate strangely in his eyes—he could feel the cold crest of fear ready to swallow him again.

As conflicted as Harry currently was about his relationship with Ginny, one thing was certain: He could not risk losing her. He could

not be left alone. The thought was enough to send a shock of stomach-twisting panic through him.

Harry would do anything to banish his fear, this doubt—to make Ginny forgive him. Groveling and humiliation were wholly within the realm of possibility if that was what she wanted.

Anything...anything...was better than this.

Something cool touched the corner of Harry's eye. Slowly, as though in a dream, he brought a hand to the side of his face.

For fuck's sake, Harry thought angrily, smearing away the tear.

Enough now. Enough.

At some point, Harry must have fallen asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Still, when he awoke at seven that morning, his entire body ached. He stumbled into the bathroom and splashed water onto his pale face. He glowered at himself in the mirror. It was not at all a flattering picture, but he lacked the energy just then to shower or shave. To make matters worse, he hadn't brought a change of clothes, so he simply left the room wearing a white shirt and his flannel pajama bottoms.

The house was very still, and Harry, matching his surroundings, walked noiselessly through his own home. He tried to push the haze of exhaustion from his eyes and think clearly, for what he was about to do required a clear head. Descending the grand staircase into the foyer, Harry heard a sound from the kitchen. Someone was making coffee.

Closing his eyes briefly, he rounded the corner.

Ginny was at the sink, washing her hands. Over the hum of the water, she heard the sound of his footfalls and turned.

"Good morning," she said, smiling.

She looked well rested.

"Morning," Harry rasped. He cleared his throat.

There was a small smile on Ginny's lips as she watched him.

"Let me get you some water," she said, moving towards the icebox.

Harry stared at her, made anxious by her cherry disposition. Had she forgotten what had happened last night?

No, she couldn't possibly...

Ginny returned with a glass, perspiration dripping off its sides.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled, taking it. The water was blessedly cold and felt wonderful on his throat.

Ginny returned to the counter and began pouring two cups of coffee.

"Lily's still asleep. Do you want some toast or something?"

Harry blinked, unsure how to respond. "Um, sure...that would be nice. Thank you."

Ginny waved her wand at a stack of bread already out on a plate. She watched as the slices turned a crisp, golden brown.

"Jam or butter?"

"Butter," Harry replied, his voice clearer now. He had always hated jam.

Harry continued to study Ginny as she directed a knife to spread butter onto the bread. She seemed perfectly occupied in preparing breakfast and thus Harry hesitantly made his way towards the table and seated himself.

He felt his elbow run against something. It was the Sunday Prophet. The Falcons' victory over the Cannons was emblazoned across the front page with a large, moving picture of Jacob Turlington catching the Snitch on repeat. Ginny's name was under the main article.

Ginny herself returned to the table, sliding a plate of buttered toast towards his hands.

"Thanks," mumbled Harry again as she seated herself across from him.

For several minutes, the sound of them chewing their toast filled the space between them. It was a sound that had characterized many of their breakfasts over the years, but today it was a different, uncomfortably pulsating sound.

Harry racked his mind in search of something to say. He briefly thought of mentioning her Prophet article, perhaps complimenting her on its prominence. But, he resisted. It would only remind her that he, Harry, had not been present for the match...

Yet, he knew he must speak.

"Ginny?" he rasped. He cleared his throat. "Ginny?"

She looked up at him with polite interest.

"I...um. I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry about yesterday...I really am." He paused, trying to think of more to add. "I promised you I'd go to the match, but I got caught up in things. I thought I was helping...but I should have gone and met you, or least told you I was late. And I didn't tell you about the opera...I'm sorry. I can cancel the tickets if you want. We don't have to go."

Ginny looked at him for a long moment, delicately holding her coffee beneath her chin. Harry did not breathe.

"Thanks for the apology," she finally said, "and you don't have to cancel the opera tickets. I've thought about it and we can go."

Harry's mouth fell open. "We can?"

"Yes, I mean it does sort of sound entertaining," she replied, pausing to blow on her coffee. "Ron did say we could dress up and I remember someone telling me that opera is like the highest form of Muggle culture. So, I suppose that might be interesting to see. You've already bought the tickets, so we'll go. It's no problem."

"Are you serious?" Harry asked, unsure whether disbelief or suspicion was coloring his voice more.

She smiled. "I'm serious. I was too quick to judge something I haven't seen. It's only one night... There's no harm in going to look, as you said."

Harry leaned back, running a hand through his particularly unruly hair. "That's...that's wonderful, Gin. Thank you."

"It's fine," she replied. She took another sip of coffee and reached for the Prophet. "Are you going to the AD today?"

"No, I don't think so," he responded. "Lily wanted me to take her to Diagon Alley. You going to work?"

"No."

"Oh."

Ginny flipped a page of the Prophet, her eyes expertly running down the columns.

"So," she said evenly, "I guess we have some free time then...especially before Lily wakes up."

"We do?"

Ginny lifted her eyes to his face. "We do."

She smiled seductively, a smile Harry knew well. But there was something there...behind her eyes. Something he did not usually see... What was it? Weakness?

Yet, Harry did not understand her meaning. She couldn't possibly mean that...not after last night.

"Just let me finish my coffee," she said.

Harry gaped at her.

It was strange.

After breakfast (and their spontaneous early morning sex), in many ways Harry's life returned to normal.

Over the next few months, his and Ginny's relationship fell into a semblance of a regular routine. They cooked dinners together, helped Lily with her homework, discussed Quidditch, traded gossip, and had sex two or three times a week. Harry even began to make a genuine effort to spend time with her outside of the house. On several occasions, he had shown up at the Prophet to take Ginny to lunch. He watched the Continental Quidditch finals with her for four nights straight, and they shopped for Mrs. Weasley's birthday present together.

And perhaps partially due to his efforts, Ginny seemed willing to forget their most recent arguments and start afresh, a development for which Harry was all too grateful. In their previous fights, Ginny was usually able to stay angry with him for long periods of time—eventually resulting in Harry's apologizing. He always did, of course, because the fear would always come back and Harry had never learned to ignore it. So, he had to admit he was pleasantly surprised the issue had blown over so easily.

The day after their reconciliation, Harry returned to work. He had briefly thought of finding Hermione and having lunch with her, but Yvain and Cassy left early that morning. Hermione and Lakey were traveling to Scotland to obtain an affidavit from a friend of Theo Callahan's and thus Harry did not see her at all that day.

Over the next few weeks, Hermione's work only became more consuming. It seemed the only time Harry and Hermione saw each other these days was in the corridors of the Ministry. They exchanged short, earnest sentences—checking in with each other—but nothing more. They did not have lunch. Harry did not visit her. She did not visit him. Normally, Harry would have felt adrift or agitated by her absence. But now, he felt strangely empty as though something important had been taken away. It was like when someone moves to a city and learns to live without seeing the horizon, without a sunset. It was a small anchor of longing—not forgotten—just ignored.

But it was not just Hermione's casework that imposed a sudden distance between them. Harry's work also became a reliable distraction. The Irish Minister of Magic was scheduled to visit England in early November and Harry was kept busy seeing to security arrangements for the Minister's high-profile meetings. There were expected to be protests. Three years ago, the Irish Ministry

had locked up two English alchemists who had been studying clurichauns in Kilkenny. The wizards had yet to be released from the Irish equivalent of Azkaban (Kilmainham) as the Ministry was convinced the wizards were English spies. There was further controversy due to the fact that Ireland still employed Dementors, a practice outlawed in England fifteen years ago.

At about the same time Harry was planning all this, Duncan entered the Agrippa School. It had been jointly decided by Hermione and the deputy headmistress, Elda Stalk, that Duncan would be introduced as a transfer student, with no mention made of his Muggle status. In the school records he was simply put down as 'Duncan C.' in order to disassociate the boy from the Callahan case. In addition, Duncan was exempted from the more magically focused classes at Agrippa. In particular, during Elementary Principles of Magic, a class in which teachers led students in "mind-focusing" exercises to increase the students' control over their own magic, Duncan would conveniently spend thirty minutes in Mrs. Stalk's office.

In one of the rare instances when they had met alone, Harry pointed out to Hermione that surely Duncan's classmates would begin to notice his continued absence from the same class. Hermione seemed to discount his concern, however, arguing that since Elementary Principles was always a large class of some thirty students, no one would notice Duncan's absence.

In truth, Harry detected a bit of a blind spot in Hermione's thinking regarding Duncan's education. She seemed so determined to keep Duncan within the magical world that she could easily overlook the glaring complications in sending a Muggle child to a wizarding school. For one, while most of Agrippa's classes were standard reading, writing, and math, all of the classes incorporated some element of magic.

In Duncan's math class, for instance, Duncan read word problems that asked him how many Galleons he would have if he sold dragon eggs to his friends. In writing class, he would be assigned essays on what magical career he wished to pursue. And in history class...he would read about the subjection of witches and wizards to Muggle intolerance and bigotry. There was no avoiding the presence of magic at Agrippa.

Yet, for the time being, everything was running perfectly. Perhaps most importantly, Duncan had Lily and Hugo, the only two students in the school who knew Duncan was a Muggle. Though they were in different classes, the three could at least eat lunch together and it had become a regular occurrence for Lily to bring Duncan home so they could complete their homework together. Lily and Hugo helped Duncan fudge his way past the magical assignments. And Duncan, who appeared to be good at every subject, helped the other two with their math and reading.

In short, Duncan had become a part of Harry's extended family. And when Halloween finally came, the boy was naturally included in their plans...

Harry began that Halloween morning standing in front of a bleached-white tombstone in a small graveyard.

It was his parents' thirty-sixth death anniversary.

They both would have been fifty-seven years old.

He had come alone this year. Ginny had hurriedly excused herself from accompanying him. She needed to put the finishing touches on Lily's Halloween costume, and besides Harry darling, she had said, there was no reason they had to go on this particular day. They could go on another, less busy day, of course...

Harry knew Ginny didn't like the annual trips to Godric's Hollow, though he did not understand why.

In truth, Ginny didn't like the change that overcame Harry with every visit. During the first years of their marriage, she had loyally stood beside him every Halloween at the grave of James and Lily Potter (the Firsts, she called them in her head). But, once the children had been born, the visits became uncomfortable for her.

Harry would sit the children down on the deep green, October grass and tell them about the grandparents they would never (and Harry would never) know. He would explain to James and Lily—as small and uncomprehending as they were—that they were named after two very special people.

Brave people. Strong people.

Invariably, Harry would choke up and tears would begin to slide down his cheeks, the meaning of his words lost in his shaky breaths. The children would cast worried glances up at their mother. Ginny hated seeing him like this. Not because it pained her to see her husband cry, but because it was a show of weakness she did not like in him.

She liked to pretend this part of Harry didn't exist.

She couldn't give him her bright, blazing look of respect while he was a weepy mess.

She didn't know how to comfort him. And after a while, she didn't care to.

She let it become a ritual. Harry would go through his tearful half-memories and long-buried desires while the children nodded their heads sadly, awkwardly. Then, checking her watch, Ginny would lead the children away.

Harry would stay kneeling by the grave. Sometimes for just five minutes, sometimes an hour.

Even from a distance, Ginny could hear him mumbling things that sounded like prayers...

Swiping away tears...

Picking leaves off the grass...

Scraping off hardened moss from the letters with his thumbnail.

She hated every minute of it.

But for Harry, these moments were incandescently, agonizingly wonderful. Since his first visit to Godric's Hollow with Hermione so many years ago, Harry had unfailingly visited the resting place of James and Lily Potter on their death day.

He loved having Ginny and the children beside him. Close to their grave, Harry felt warm waves of nostalgia and could-have-beens

wash over him. He felt they were almost a proper family in those moments. Three generations put together. In harmony at last.

Yet, for all the visits he had made to this spot, the most memorable in his mind had always been the first one...the one he shared with Hermione.

She had been able to read his mind then. No sooner had he wished he had brought something to place on their graves then she had magicked a wreath of Christmas roses. She explained the meaning of the inscription—The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death—when he had assumed it was a twisted Death Eater mantra.

No, she had explained. It's about defeating death by living beyond it.

Love always outlives Death.

This had comforted Harry. He had liked her interpretation. The meaning rang through him like a deep bell—ancient and new, mysterious and revelatory. An Old Truth.

Sensing his desire to leave, they had then wrapped their arms around each other and passed silently through the snow, the kissing gate...

But, Harry did his ritual alone that morning. Cleaning off the grave, running his hands over their names.

He summoned a wreath of autumn flowers and placed them below the old quotation.

He passed silently through the kissing gate, alone.

Yet, when Harry returned to the house, the bustle of activity soon brought him out of his thanatopsis.

Under the supervision of Mrs. Weasley, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny prepared a large feast complete with sweet-stuffed jack-o'-lanterns and five-foot-long candy snakes. The children were then set loose in one of the few predominantly wizard neighborhoods of London: Whitechapel.

It was a rather dodgy area, full of witches and wizards in their early twenties with no fixed career paths. But, it was almost a rite of passage to live there at some point in your life. Indeed, Harry and the others had lived in Whitechapel for four years after they graduated from Hogwarts.

Now, as the children ran from brownstone to brownstone, Harry and the others watched carefully from the street. Every Halloween, the Ministry mandated that all magical residences within three kilometers of Muggles cast strong anti-Muggle charms across the thresholds of their homes. This was done to ensure that no wayward Muggles found themselves in a magical house on Halloween. To a Muggle, the house would either appear abandoned or a bowl of candy would be left outside the door. As a result, Lily had to repeatedly drag Duncan across the barriers of the magical homes to get him inside, as Duncan was always convinced the house was empty.

Yet, Duncan quickly learned that trick-or-treating in the wizarding world was much more exciting than its Muggle counterpart...and taken much more seriously. There was always a fifty-fifty chance you would be tricked in the most fabulously magical fashion and receive no candy at all! The young wizards who lived in Whitechapel also tried to outdo one another with their terrifying creations. Besides the standard decorations, some flats went so far as to hire ghosts for the occasion, install boggarts in hall cupboards, and fill bowls with squishy, but fake, acromantula eggs.

Once Duncan understood the process, he and Lily became the most adventurous. They charged into houses and ran out screaming when it became clear there would be no candy. Hugo usually hung back or clung tightly to Lily's arm. It was a rather amusing picture as Lily was dressed as a princess and Hugo as a knight. Duncan had chosen to be an elf, his face painted bright green. Ron, after pointing out to Duncan that only Muggles believed elves were such a shade of green, found a set of pointed ears for him in Diagon Alley.

Among the adults, Harry was the only one who had not attempted a costume despite the protests of his wife and Hermione. His excuse was he already was a costume. Since the defeat of Voldemort, the Harry Potter 'look' had become a classic around Halloween. Indeed, Harry subtly turned to the side as a group of children darted past

him, one of the girls wearing a Gryffindor scarf and a lightening bolt drawn onto her forehead.

"You reckon there's more trick than treat houses this year?" he casually asked Ron.

"People are getting stingy with the candy," Ron grumbled, shaking his pockets, where he was stashing a good portion of Hugo's sweets.

Ginny laughed, watching her brother's face. "I guess that would be bad, seeing as half the candy comes from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes these days."

Ron shrugged. "It's just the recession."

Since Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes had acquired Honeydukes in 2002, Halloween was typically a boom time for Ron and George. Yet, judging by the amount of candy Lily had given Harry to keep safe, there was no shortage of sweets this year.

"I doubt that," said Harry, laughing. "You're going to make a killing, as usual..."

At that moment, the children burst out of another house. They were laughing uproariously, which could only mean there had been candy. Spotting their parents, Lily and Hugo scampered towards them, Duncan following after.

Ron returned Hugo's bag of candy. Hugo stared at it, noting its inexplicable lightness. He eyed his father distrustfully, but dumped the new candy in with the rest.

"Mummy!" he shouted at Hermione, his suit of armor clanking as he pranced towards her. "You hold my bag, okay?"

Hermione took it. The children ran off towards the next house.

"Little git is catching on," Ron mumbled dispiritedly.

The others laughed.

The adults followed more slowly after the children, Harry bringing up the rear.

A moment later, however, Hermione drifted away from the others and fell into pace next to Harry. She somewhat hesitantly looped her arm through his. Harry immediately felt a chill pass through him, all of his sensation honing in on the feeling of her arm in his.

They hadn't touched like this for quite some time.

"What's up?" he asked with an imperceptible tremble in his voice.

"Nothing," she said quietly, so that only he could hear. "I was just thinking how nice it is having Duncan with us, don't you think? It's almost like having Teddy back."

Harry chuckled slightly, letting his laughter pierce through the tightening of his stomach.

For the past fifteen years, Harry's family had already had one 'unofficial' son in the form of Teddy Lupin. But Ted was grown up now and had recently left England after giving Victoire Weasley a rather passionate goodbye on Platform 9¾. What he was doing now, no one was exactly sure, but that was usually the case with Teddy. Last Harry heard, Teddy was bunking up in New York City with a friend trying to start a band. Thus, with one adoptive son gone, Harry had to admit he liked having one more boy in the family.

"Yeah," said Harry simply. "It is nice."

Hermione made a contented sound, squeezing his arm more tightly.

A warmth seemed to pass from him to her, like tea from a tea bag. His heart raced.

Yet, Harry felt eyes on him and Hermione. He looked up in time to see Ginny glancing back at him, her eyes trailing down to Harry and Hermione's entwined arms.

Ginny's face became very still and she turned away.

Harry cleared his throat and released Hermione.

"Gin," he called, catching up to her. "Lily's given me too much candy. You hold some, won't you?"

Ginny's face spread hesitantly into a closed-lipped smile. She took the candy and began stuffing it into her cloak.

As Harry handed fistfuls of sweets to his wife, he heard Hermione's quick footsteps from behind him. She came to stand next to Ron, but Harry caught a glimpse of her face before it was covered by her hair. She was looking down, biting her lip softly.

She looked distinctly unhappy...

Why did she look upset?

This was the question that bothered Harry the rest of the night.

Lying with Ginny in his arms a few hours later, Harry began to wonder if it had something to do with him.

Was she sad because I pulled away from her? Or was it just that she was thinking about Teddy? he wondered, stroking Ginny's bare arm as she began to breathe more slowly.

I-It can't be because I pulled away from her. Ginny had been watching...Hermione must know I'm trying to get things back on track with her. She's doing the same with Ron. There's no reason for her to be upset about my pulling away.

It's what she wants, isn't it? It's what I want.

Harry glanced at Ginny. Her skin was luminescent in fire currently roaring in the hearth. It was the only light the room, the curtains having been shut to keep out the chill, night air.

This is what I want, Harry thought for perhaps the six hundredth time that month. It really is. What else am I possibly supposed to want?

Hadn't Harry's life over the past few weeks been identical to the life he had lived for the last ten years now?

Since he had married Ginny, since the children had been born, since becoming Chief of the Auror Department...hadn't it all gone spectacularly well? You could even say 'according to plan,' had there been a plan?

Harry glanced at Ginny again, now breathing deeply and wedged against the hollow of his shoulder. It was beginning to pinch...

He shifted her slightly, just enough so he could remove his arm. Fortunately, she continued to breathe peacefully.

I mean...nothing is different, Harry thought, tucking his arm back towards himself. We talk about the same things. We make each other laugh. She's still smart, bitingly funny. We're having sex just as we used to...two or three times a week. I should count myself lucky. How many couples, after thirteen years of marriage, could say that? And I mean....yeah, I like having sex with her. I look forward to it. It's sex. What's not to like?

Yet, beneath his regard for sex—something Harry had felt ever since he lost his virginity to Ginny at sixteen—he knew something was different and, he dreaded to think, wrong.

It was like...at times...he didn't feel anything with her.

He wasn't physically numb or anything like that. It was more like he was mentally shutoff. Over the past few weeks, having sex with Ginny just felt mechanical, almost an obligation. He felt a certain sort of detachment from his movements, like he was going through the motions—his lips moving automatically, his hands moving to their assigned locations, his hips thrusting at the right speed, the right strength.

Like an automaton.

Yet, it was not as if Harry's mind was wandering while he had sex with his wife. In fact, he was pleased to report that his mind had not flashed to Hermione in these moments. Rather, he just thought nothing at all! And what was strange was that Ginny did not seem to notice anything amiss. He supposed in the moments when he lapsed...when he became distant from her and everything...that he was performing his part well. For this, Harry was relieved. He did not want Ginny to think he did not enjoy having sex with her...because at some level he did, and always would.

Yet...he could not deny that this was wrong. He had never felt this way in the entirety of their marriage. If Harry was honest with

himself—as he was loathe to be these days—he could describe the predicament quite easily...

It was like he could see the contours of life.

The shape and meaning of it all seemed to hover before him in a way it had not done since he stood in Forbidden Forest to await his death. In that endless moment, Harry had understood his purpose, the inevitability of his sacrifice. And at last, after seventeen years of resistance, he had bowed to that higher obligation, that cross thrust upon him the night blood flowed hot and free from a scar on his head.

Yes, it was somewhat like that now.

And by contours Harry meant he could see his life—all that had come before and all that was happening now—and well...it appeared very... happy.

He already had all the pieces of a good life.

A successful career. A loving and beautiful wife. Three brilliant children who seemed every day to cleave themselves more irrevocably to his heart.

And Ron and Hermione...his best friends who had not left his side in twenty-six years. Perhaps the longest and most fulfilling relationships of his life.

It was all there, all the pieces put together naturally coming out to happiness, to peace.

So what explained this? This emptiness, this sense of loss?

The faintest inkling that there was something more...

But a lot of people feel this way, thought Harry reasonably. He edged towards the side of the bed and swung a leg over, groping for his slippers. The floor was like ice. A lot of married couples start to feel this way, right, around my age? They start to feel like they were destined for something more, something special...

Harry eased out of the bed, warily watching Ginny. She did not stir and he picked up his glasses from the side table. Moving quietly towards the door, he slipped into the hallway. He watched his feet pass over the rich brocade rug that lined the corridor. When he came to a stop at the bottom of the grand staircase, he looked up at the highly polished banister shining softly in the glow from the chandelier above. Fake bats and sticky cobwebs still hung from it, sending leering shadows across the walls.

The house was quiet, a light pattering of rain on the windows the only sound.

Harry moved towards the kitchen, heading immediately for the small liquor cabinet above the cupboard. He summoned a bottle of firewhiskey from the back and poured himself a generous amount.

Harry then moved slowly to the library and sat in his usual place—the high-backed, leather armchair that directly faced a *récamier*. Hermione had once sat there and told him he was a wonderful father...

Harry took a large swallow of firewhiskey. He coughed slightly but immediately took another swig. He watched as the rain slid off the windows in long, elegant rivulets. His thoughts returned to that strange feeling of emptiness that had defined his life over the past few weeks.

Where did it come from? Why was he restless?

He tried to think as rationally as possible. He knew perfectly well that people his age often became jaded with their lives...

Everyone has these expectations as they grew up—what they'll be, how they'll live—but at some point, everyone compromises, Harry thought sullenly. For a higher salary, for a girlfriend, for kids, for security—for just fucking convenience—everyone compromises. You fall short of your expectations and you're left wondering how your life got so mediocre, so unlike what you wanted. And then, well, you become restless...

But even as he thought this, Harry knew it was wrong...at least in his case.

He had never had to compromise. Against his will, Harry had always been destined for something special; there had never been any doubt that his life would amount to something. He was not in want of anything. And he was perfectly aware of how rare it was to be able to say that.

All the markers of a good life were there.

Money? He had been rich since the day his parents died. His Auror salary was so astronomical that Harry was slightly embarrassed. The proceeds from Ginny's Quidditch career and the numerous consultative fees she took in meant that she, like all the Weasley children, had enriched herself under her own steam.

Fame? Though it had never mattered much to Harry, he was just about universally adored in the wizarding world. He had resisted calls to run for Minister of Magic upwards of five times now. He was constantly barraged with interview requests or hounded by authors who wanted to publish his first authorized biography. There was hardly a wizard or witch on the planet who did not know his name.

Security? In all of Europe, Harry was probably the most proficient wizard in the defensive arts.

Children? Harry could not fathom having more intelligent, beautiful, kind-hearted children than he already had.

And love?

Harry supposed he was lucky in this realm as well, especially in comparison to his past. It seemed a miracle that Harry's life was filled with such love considering the loss of his parents, his miserable childhood, and the cloud of death that seemed permanently fixed over him until the fall of Voldemort.

Now, he had a wonderful extended family, thanks to the Weasleys. He had his friends from Hogwarts and the Auror Academy. And then, of course, there were the people who meant everything to him. His brave, intelligent, and beautiful wife. Ron, who fulfilled the role of the brother Harry never had.

And Hermione....

Hermione.

Harry let his thoughts stop there.

The point was he was not suffering from a 'midlife crisis.' There was just nothing to suffer from.

So, what explained the emptiness, the feeling that he was missing something? Almost like someone was calling his name behind a locked door...and he felt the terrible urge to rip that door open ...

Harry closed his eyes and swung his arm towards the side table to set down his glass. The glass hit the edge and firewhiskey spilled onto his hand.

He mumbled a curse, but brought his hands to his face anyway.

Harry felt like he was living inside a pressure cooker that every day came closer to exploding...

He kept himself so controlled, so tightly wound these days.

He desperately wanted to focus on this supposedly perfect life, but that meant he had to stop thinking of Hermione...because Harry had to admit that thinking of Hermione made it impossible to lead a normal life.

Yet, it was just as impossible to stop thinking of her.

What was more was the thoughts he was having about her these days...they were very hard to ignore.

Harry could feel her presence even before she entered a room. It was like all the cells inside of him vibrated realizing she was close, like one of those electrical current orbs Harry used to see in Muggle museums. An invisible current running from him to her.

The current seemed to draw them together and inevitably, even in large groups, Harry found himself sitting close to Hermione. Yet, they remained stonily silent on most days and should Hermione speak, Harry found that he was unable to look at her properly. He would haltingly respond to her greetings, mumble answers, refuse to meet her eyes.

But then...there were other times when he could not stop himself from looking at her, from raking his eyes over her body. He was mesmerized by the way her lips moved as she spoke, as she laughed. He studied how her eyes crinkled in the corners when she was happy and how they did not when she was only smiling to be polite. Her eyes looked so tired these days, but nonetheless beautiful to him.

She often caught him staring and she would look at him strangely. In the past, she might have raised her eyebrows, smiled, and asked him what was the matter. But now...she never said anything. She looked almost embarrassed. Harry could only imagine she was embarrassed for him and the way he was acting...

Now, Harry pulled his hands from his face. He watched the rain for several moments as the water slid off the panes. He took another swig of the firewhiskey, his hand now sticking to the glass.

There was another, final way he thought of Hermione. A way Harry could not control.

He had been in the shower when it happened—the first time he masturbated to the thought of Hermione Granger.

It had been after a long day at the AD two weeks back. Harry had just been standing there under the hot water, letting the day's aches and anxieties be carried off by the steam when he thought of Hermione.

He hadn't meant to think of her. It had been quite accidental.

He simply recalled that Hermione masturbated in the shower. Two or three times a week. She had told him so at Oxford. She had been quite clinical about it.

But once Harry remembered this, there was really no going back.

A heady, intoxicating sensation seemed to rise up in the pit of his stomach, sending chills over his body though the water was so hot. He was overpowered by it. The vision of Hermione completely naked, water sliding down her skin as she trailed one delicate hand towards the space between her legs, touching herself.

His thoughts twisted and melded, separated and reformed without his consent. Soon he was imagining how Hermione would look with water sliding into the valley of her breasts. He imagined her reaching up to catch her own breast, her lips parting slightly as she teased her nipple into a tight point, her other hand dipping and disappearing inside her core. And all the while, the steam rising up and kissing her flushed and flawless skin...

He had come hard and fast, wiring his mouth shut so he wouldn't make a sound. When the glow had vanished, he collapsed against the wall shocked by what he had done.

He had felt wretched then, bracing himself against the wall with his arms.

What the fuck was he doing?

He thought something similar the next night. When he did it again. And the next night. And the rest of the week.

It was not that he had never pictured Hermione without her clothes before. He had. When they had been growing up, Harry never denied that Hermione was very pretty. Particularly by their seventh year, Harry had to admit that she was quite stunning. She had an athletic build, ample breasts, a slender waist, and even her bushy hair had calmed down somewhat...

He would readily admit the thought of what Hermione looked like naked had crossed his mind frequently over the years, but never to a distracting extent. While they were on the run from Voldemort, he had even caught the briefest glimpses of her naked. Just fleeting glances of her nudity as she got out of the tub and quickly wrapped a towel around herself, just as she must have caught glimpses of both Harry and Ron. Ron had stared quite openly at her breasts. And even Harry remembered being briefly stunned by seeing portions—even for the most fleeting moments—of his best friend that he had never seen before. Yet, he remained discreet with his glances ...feeling Hermione would be horribly embarrassed if she knew what they had seen.

Those had been different, darker days. But now, Harry's imagination was running away with him.

And then it finally happened...his mind officially and irrevocably took it one step too far.

He imagined Hermione shouted his name as she came.

And after that, how could Harry not begin adding himself to his own fantasies?

There was no going back.

How amazing it would be, he imagined, if I was there with her? Pressing her against the wall, her breasts touching his chest. He'd kiss her hard on the lips until her mouth was ringed red and then move to her neck, her chest and pull each pink tip into his hot mouth. His mind obsessed over what it must feel like to have her slick body grinding against his, her breath warm and heavy on his neck like the very steam surrounding him. Hermione clinging to him. Hermione running her fingers up his back. Hermione telling him to take her completely, that she wanted him...desperately.

It was powerful. It was magical. It was the only time he wasn't on his guard these days, and it made him feel wonderful.

But, without fail, as soon as he released himself he would sink down into self-loathing.

He was lusting after his best friend.

Who was married to his best friend.

Who was the brother of his wife.

Whom he was cheating on in his mind.

His life was a shit show. A spectacular fuck up.

But to the entire world, he was still Harry Potter—living his life in a blur of wealth and fame and nobility. It was all just an act, Harry now realized. No more real than his fantasies about Hermione. Life was moving under his feet, like a ship in a storm.

And Harry had nothing to hold onto.

Chapter 15: Lost in Translation / The Fallen Woman

Alfredo, Alfredo, di questo core
Non puoi comprendere tutto l'amore;
Tu non conosci che fino a prezzo
Del tuo disprezzo - provato io l'ho!
Ma verrà giorno in che il saprai
Com'io t'amassi confesserai
Dio dai rimorsi ti salvi allora;
Io spenta ancora - pur t'amerò.

Alfredo, Alfredo you cannot fathom
All the love in my heart for you;
How should you know that I have proved it,
Even at the price of your contempt?
But the time will come when you will know,
When you'll admit how much I loved you.
God save you then from all remorse!
Even after death I shall still love you.

-La Traviata, Act II, Scene 2

"Are you ready, my sweetheart?" Hermione asked.

Duncan looked like he was about to be sick. He could only shake his head.

Hermione didn't say anything. She placed her hands on his small, wing-like shoulders and smoothed away the creases in his woolen coat.

Harry waited for this moment to step in.

"Here you go, mate," said Harry with false ease.

He handed Duncan a pint-sized bowler hat. It was a shrunken version of one Hermione's father owned and kept around for the odd wedding.

Duncan placed it on his head, fingers trembling.

"Is it on right?" he asked Hermione nervously.

She smiled. "Perfect. But maybe," she reached out and tweaked it so that it sat at a slightly rakish angle on Duncan's head. "Yes, that's better. Now let me see the cigar?"

Duncan fiddled with his pockets and pulled out an exploding joke cigar from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Hermione had deactivated the spell, making it appear to be a normal cigar, though it looked comically large in Duncan's hands.

"Very nice," Hermione said, tucking the cigar back into the breast pocket of Duncan's antiquated waistcoat. "Just remember your lines and if anyone asks..."

"I'm a Muggle-born."

She squeezed his arm before standing up.

She glanced at Harry and straightened her dress. It was a deep green frock, trimmed with white cuffs that stopped at her elbow. The hem cut just above her ankles, revealing heeled boots of chocolate-colored suede. Her hair was pulled into a messy bun.

Harry, who had felt the bead of heat crawling under his skin as he looked at her, cast his eyes about the room.

The foyer of Harry and Ginny's home was glowing that evening. From the chandelier hung several bushels of mistletoe and evergreen boughs had been woven up the banisters of the grand staircase. It gave a lovely impression—warm and safe—compared to the howling wind outside. Three-day-old snow was being tossed through the air, making it appear as if it were snowing again.

Lily was snapping on her boots. She was wearing a smart, empire-waist dress underneath a midnight blue coat. She also looked nervous, her shoulders thrown back too far. She kept patting her hair, which had been pulled into a bun and powdered white in order to give the impression she had aged well beyond her nine years.

Only Hugo appeared at his ease. He was wearing Quidditch robes of grey and white, the number 45 emblazoned on his back. It was the same number as Damien Donovan, the retired and legendary Quidditch Seeker for the Falmouth Falcons.

Ron was standing by Lily, having her twirl around so he could take in her costume.

Ginny was sitting cross-legged on the floor by Hugo while he recited his lines.

Harry stayed by Duncan as Hermione stepped forward.

"It's getting late," she said with the cheery, chiding voice she had developed in motherhood. "We said we wouldn't be late this time around, as we just caused an uproar coming in last time."

Ginny got up off the floor. "Lily, stop touching your hair and hold Uncle Ron's hand," she called to her daughter.

Lily looked momentarily struck, but lowered her hands.

There was general bustling as the adults checked that the children had all their things in order. A minute later, Harry spoke over the din.

"Everyone set?" he asked. "Pair off now, kids. You should each be holding a grown-up's hand."

Ginny took Hugo's hand. Ron Lily's. Hermione Duncan's.

Harry was left by himself. He quickly grabbed Duncan's hand as well, as the boy was the closest to him.

"Okay," Harry said.

A series of pops and Harry felt as though enormous hands were pressing hard against his skull, his chest, his entire body. Yet, he could still feel Duncan banging against his side.

A moment later they landed in a humming auditorium.

Ahead, Harry could see teachers herding children towards a stage at the back of the hall. The children were dressed in every costume imaginable, from dour dress robes to shinning Quidditch uniforms.

Harry and the others pushed their way through the crowd.

A kind voice soon called out to Lily and Hugo. It was Mrs. Wildsmith, their history teacher. Briefly greeting Harry and the others, she guided the two younger children away. A moment later, a more severe-looking witch appeared for Duncan.

Harry realized that this woman was Elda Stalk, the deputy headmistress of the Agrippa wizarding preparatory school. She was one of the few people who knew Duncan was a Muggle.

"Duncan," Mrs. Stalk said, her face becoming considerably warmer when she smiled, "your class is already lined up in the back. I'll take you to there, dear."

She stepped to the side to let Duncan pass.

But Duncan held tightly to Harry's hand. His palm was moist.

Hermione and Mrs. Stalk shared a glance, both looking more than a little anxious. Harry glanced at Hermione and then knelt down to Duncan's height, the crowd closing around them like a hive.

"Remember: there's nothing to worry about," Harry whispered directly in his ear. "We're here, aren't we? We're looking out for you."

Harry straightened the bowler hat on Duncan's head and sighed.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of, son."

At this, Duncan met Harry's eyes briefly and seemed to steel himself. He slipped his hand from Harry's and was swept away by Mrs. Stalk.

A new hand slipped into Harry's palm.

"Will this work?" Hermione breathed by his ear.

"I thought you had all the answers."

She was silent for a moment.

"Only about what's been done before."

A few minutes later, all the children had been removed from the hall. The clamor of voices became deeper, less wild with nerves and excitement.

Harry and the others found a table near the front of the stage—there were no chairs in the beautiful auditorium, only tall, circular tables. Wreaths of holly and candles had been placed on each table, the wicks glimmering off the carved wooden beams in the ceiling.

Almost before Harry could catch his breath, his and Ginny's side of the table was descended upon by a swarm of people. Prophet reporters elbowed their way to Ginny, telling her about their own children and what famous witch or wizard they had chosen to be for the Winter Pageant. Harry's fellow Aurors gave their greetings and then an endless procession of Ministry officials came to call.

Five minutes later, Harry was looking desperately towards the stage, praying the pageant would begin. Ginny was currently talking to a half dozen Prophet staffers about the upcoming New Year's Ball at their home.

Harry released a short sigh. He was rubbish at this sort of thing: appearing interested in things he couldn't care less about, listening to sycophantic retellings of the events of his own life.

He glanced at Ron and Hermione's side of the table. The situation looked a little better from over there.

A few employees from the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes were chatting with Ron. They appeared to be discussing Quidditch and Ron was so excited by the conversation he was neglecting his drink. (They had simply to speak their orders to the table before glasses of cider, eggnog, and mulled wine magically appeared).

Harry couldn't help noticing that Hermione looked slightly out of place. With a start, he realized that despite the fact that Ministry officials nearly encircled their entire table, no one from the Ministry had come to speak to Hermione...

Harry was not staring at her long before Hermione turned and met his gaze. They looked at each other for a long moment. She smiled a little sadly as though she could tell what he had been thinking.

In another moment, her face vanished as the lights flickered. The show was starting.

Over the years, Harry had sat through the Winter Pageant at the Agrippa School more times than he would have chosen. The younger children who attended the School, those between the ages of six and eight, would usually perform a song or a short skit. The older children (those Lily, Hugo, and Duncan's age) would wear a costume and recite a short speech about a famous witch or wizard they admired.

Harry already knew what he would see. There would be several Merlins, a smattering of Dumbledores, innumerable Quidditch stars, a few heart-warming tributes to parents, and, yes, at least a handful of Harry Potters.

Those were the most humiliating for Harry. There was always a general rumble of laughter around the room as the next child stepped forward, bespectacled, scarred, and decked in Gryffindor robes. Heads would swivel in his direction. Harry had learned to grin tightly and nod his head to the plaudits thrown in his direction. It was all he could do. To look displeased or uncomfortable would be terribly bad form.

Suddenly, there was a ripple of applause as a stout, middle-aged woman stepped onto the stage.

Harry instantly recognized her as Charlene Agrippa, the school's headmistress and a direct descendent of the school's founder, Cornelius Agrippa. She was wearing burgundy dress robes with square shoulders, a festive holly wreath pinned to her lapel.

"My dear witches and warlocks," she said after delicately performing a Sonorous charm by touching her wand to an enormous pearl necklace, "I would like to welcome you all to our three-hundredth-and-twenty-fourth annual Christmas Pageant at the Cornelius Agrippa School for Elementary Wizardry. Cornelius Agrippa, my direct ancestor, began this institution to celebrate the richness of wizarding culture. Thus, the Christmas Pageant was initiated in order to amplify that rich tradition during this special and festive season."

There was a smattering of polite applause.

"And during this season it is more important than ever to pay homage to our shared history, as Muggle influences attempt to muddle the meaning of the season. Thus, it is appropriate, and indeed essential, to remember our magical roots and pay tribute to the achievements of our kind as a unique culture and community."

Harry and Hermione's eyes met.

"The children have been working exceptionally hard to perform for you all tonight. The students from classes one through three will perform a skit and song. Children in classes four through six will present their annual tribute to the great witches and wizards of history. With that, I welcome Madame Henschwood onto the stage, the estimable instructor for class one for the last forty-seven years. Madame Henschwood?"

The hall broke into applause again.

Just as Harry was thinking he would like to sit through what would inevitably be a long evening, something bumped against his calves.

A plush velvet chair was gently tapping his legs. He looked forward and found Ginny seating herself in an identical chair. Soon, the entire audience was settling into their seats, the tables magically lowering themselves.

The lights dimmed—or rather the myriad of fairies floating along the ceiling clumped themselves into the corners, creating a warm, soft glow throughout the hall.

After Madame Henschwood gave her introduction, a stream of nervous looking children emerged.

The children began a mumbling, halting version of the Wassail Song. Harry could barely understand the words, but he knew them by heart now.

"Here we come a-wassailing

Among the leaves so green.

Here we come a-wand'ring

So fair to be seen.

Love and joy come to you,

And to all your wassail, too,

May the gods bless you, and send you

A Happy New Year,

The gods send you a Happy New Year."

Yet, the rendition was endearing all the same—at least according to the looks on Ginny and Hermione's faces.

By the time the older children took the stage, Harry was feeling warm and a little sleepy. The mulled wine was certainly taking its effect. Yet, he perked up when Lily's class filed onto the stage. Lily looked into the crowd, seeking out her parents. Harry quickly waved and his daughter beamed.

A young wizard in his twenties came to the front of the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the children of Class Four are happy to present you with a sample of great wizards and witches throughout magical history. I invite our first student, Mr. Gregory Lutgendorf, to present his famous wizard. Greg?"

A rather pudgy boy waddled forward looking uncomfortable in colorful robes made of scratchy wool.

"My famous wizard," the boy mumbled. He stopped as his teacher waved a hand towards the ceiling, telling the boy to raise his voice. "My famous wizard is Bertie Bott."

A general rumble of appreciation.

"Bertie Bott is a gifted candy-maker whose most famous invention is Every Flavor Beans. I like him very much because when mum isn't home to cook me things, I can eat roast beef beans and when my sister is mean I give her a dirty sock bean."

The crowd laughed lightly.

"This is why I admire Bertie Bott. Thank you."

Harry clapped politely along with the rest of the audience.

The children continued down the line. Harry scanned the students quickly and was relieved to find that none of the children were dressed as himself. He supposed that might have to do with the fact that Lily was in the group. Most students wouldn't want to choose a famous wizard whose daughter was in their very class.

A few minutes later, Ginny laid a hand on his knee and tilted her head towards the stage.

"Lily," she mouthed.

Harry sat up straighter and craned his neck so he could see Lily fully. She was looking towards her teacher, waiting to be told when to begin. She looked slightly more apprehensive now, her fingers twisting around themselves.

Finally, she spoke.

"The famous witch I admire," she said in a high, yet strong, voice, "is Artemisia Lufkin. She was the first witch to become Minister of Magic and had three consecutive terms from 1800 to 1815. She was not always liked because of some of her ideas, but she always fought for what she knew was right. One day I hope to be just like her and that is why I admire Minister Lufkin. Thank you."

Another rumble of applause as Lily returned to her place in line, Harry and the others clapping the loudest. Harry looked across the table. Ron was grinning at him, as was Hermione.

Harry leaned forward towards Ginny. "You help her with that?" he asked.

Ginny smiled. "Of course. We had better watch out that no one starts ginning up a run for Lily to be Minister in twenty years."

"I'd laugh, but that's actually not out of the question, is it?"

Ginny only grinned and turned back to the stage.

Hugo was the last student in Class Four and presented his famous wizard, Damien Donovan of the Falmouth Falcons. He spoke a little too fast, but his memory for Donovan's career statistics was quite impressive.

"Future Quidditch commentator," Harry heard Ron mumble in a carrying whisper.

"Yes," Hermione grumbled, "and if he'd apply that mental stamina to his math marks, we wouldn't be getting so many owls from his teacher."

Ron pretended not to hear her and cheered wildly as Hugo retook his place in the line.

Lily and Hugo's class filed off the stage, looking considerably more at ease than they had when they walked on. The group was replaced by a slightly larger class of ten-year-olds, Class Five.

This time, Harry's stomach sank. Two Harry Potters.

Ron was already snickering.

Harry waited like a student anticipating punishment for the first boy dressed as Harry Potter to step forward. As soon as he did, it was just as Harry predicted: there was a rumble of laughter around the hall, followed quickly by the sound of chairs shifting and bodies adjusting to have a clear look at the real Harry.

The least they could do is look at the kid, Harry thought sarcastically, staring fixedly at the stage. Even Ginny was looking at him.

The boy wore thick, black-rimmed glasses—much thicker than the ones Harry actually wore—and hand-me-down Gryffindor robes. When he spoke, he sounded like he had an asthmatic condition.

Harry was immediately transported to a time when he looked very much like the boy on the stage (minus the asthma). Had he really looked that scared then? That pathetic?

No offense to the parents.

Yet, the boy stuck to the facts.

"My famous wizard is Harry Potter," the boy said between giant gulps of air. "He is called the Boy Who Lived because he is the only person who has never died by the Killing Curse. When Harry Potter went to Hogwarts, You-Know-Who was after him a lot. But in the end, Harry Potter defeated You-Know-Who and the wizarding world got better. Now he is the Chief of the Aurors and kills bad guys forever. That is why I admire Harry Potter. Thank you."

A slightly louder round of applause rose from the audience.

Harry wired a smile onto his face and the boy stepped back into line.

"Very admirable," Ron said lightly, "this 'killing of bad guys forever' business."

Harry reached for his wand, the universal, magical symbol for "fuck off."

Ron innocently raised his palms before Hermione hit her husband's arm and nodded towards the stage.

The second Harry Potter said many of the same things, though he said his lines in an overly memorized, robotic fashion.

The chairs began to swivel back to their original positions, and Harry released a small sigh of relief that the humiliation was over.

Ginny turned back to him and smiled. "Sweet, wasn't it?"

"Oh, very sweet," Harry said tightly.

Ginny nodded, not appreciating the sarcasm.

Finally, Class Six filed onto the stage. These were the oldest students, the ones heading off to Hogwarts next year...save one.

Harry heard Hermione shift in her chair.

Duncan was standing between a boy dressed in old-fashioned, velvet robes and a small, blonde girl in Quidditch robes. Duncan did

not look particularly out of place with his long tailcoat and bowler hat. He could perhaps be mistaken for a Ministry official, a Cornelius Fudge of sorts.

A middle-aged witch appeared on the stage. Harry vaguely remembered Hermione telling him that the teacher's name was Mistress Goshawk, the unmarried daughter of the famous spellbook writer Miranda Goshawk.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the last set of students are from Class Six and wish to present to you their choices of the famous witch or wizard they admire."

The first student was called. She spoke very articulately on Elfrida Clagg, a former Chieftainess of the Warlock's Council.

The second student was the boy before Duncan. He presented, rather predictably, on Merlin. He particularly focused on the founding of the Order of Merlin.

Finally, it was Duncan's turn.

Harry watched the small boy. Duncan pulled out his fake cigar as Mistress Goshawk announced his name. He touched his bowler hat—making sure it was at the angle Hermione suggested—and stepped forward.

His face was bright pink. It shone brightly under the hovering stage lights. Even from a distance, Harry could tell Duncan's fingers were shaking, the cigar wiggling like a feather. Yet, it was Duncan's eyes that struck him. There was something there, like a spark of determination or resignation, Harry couldn't tell which. Perhaps they were the same.

Ginny reached a hand back and replaced it on Harry's knee.

Once Duncan received a nod from his professor, he began.

"My famous person is Sir Winston Churchill," he said shakily.

Did the hall go still or was it just Harry's imagination?

"Churchill was the Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War II," Duncan continued, his voice rising. "He is widely considered to be one of the best wartime leaders in history. Because of his famous speeches and efforts, Britain had the courage to resist Nazi Germany's demands and the air raids that followed. Because of Churchill, many lives were saved. Without him, Britain may not have been a free country today. He was also a gifted writer and artist and is the only British prime minister to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. For all these reasons, I admire Sir Winston Churchill. Thank you."

Now, Harry expected one of two things to happen.

One. It was nearing ten o'clock and a lot of mulled wine and eggnog had been consumed in the hall. Attention was already drifting among the adults, and perhaps many people would merely overlook Duncan's speech. They were simply too bored or too sloshed to listen anymore.

Two. They would notice that Duncan had just made a speech about a Muggle. During an event specifically designed to celebrate wizarding history.

Harry snapped his eyes away from Duncan and looked surreptitiously around the hall.

It seemed both reactions were occurring simultaneously.

Perhaps half the people in the room were eyeing the exits. The other half was either staring at Duncan or looking uneasily at their companions.

After what seemed like ages, a halting applause bubbled up from the crowd.

Harry looked at Hermione. Yet, her eyes were solely for Duncan. Her applause was perhaps the loudest in the hall.

Duncan merged back into line, the other students looking as though nothing at all was amiss. The next student came to the front of the stage, but Harry couldn't help noticing that there seemed to be more whispers filling the hall than before Duncan spoke.

Harry tried to catch Hermione's eye, to communicate his concern. But she was not looking at him. Her eyes were still fixed on Duncan, a satisfied smile on her lips.

How can she smile? Harry thought while willing Hermione's head to turn in his direction. Can't she guess what people are saying?

Finally, her head turned. She beamed at him.

Harry's eyes widened. Unbelievable.

The Winter Pageant ended promptly after Duncan's class finished their presentations. All of the students who had been cloistered backstage streamed into the hall. Parents and children noisily reunited, children asking how they had done, parents offering obligatory praise.

"Mum!" Lily shouted upon pouncing on her mother. "How did I do? All right? I forgot to mention her winning land rights from the goblins. Do you think that's okay?"

"More than okay, love," Ginny said, embracing Lily tightly. "You were brilliant and you looked very smart."

Lily beamed. "You think so too, daddy?"

"Yes, sweetheart," Harry answered her, smiling. "The best by far."

Hugo was also receiving glowing reviews from Ron and Hermione. Perhaps because she was so consumed with her son, Hermione did not immediately see where Duncan had gone off. But Harry soon spotted the small boy dressed as Winston Churchill.

An elderly wizard and a young witch had stopped Duncan on his way to Harry and the others. The man seemed to be engaging Duncan in conversation, his head held low by Duncan's ear.

Harry could not see Duncan's face.

Before he remembered making a conscious decision, Harry's feet were carrying him towards the strangers with Duncan.

He got the first clear look at the boy's face as he approached. He looked agitated, just as he had when Harry used the word "Muggle" in front of him for the first time. There was a thin line between his brows.

"May I help you?" said Harry, announcing himself behind the elderly man's shoulder.

The two strangers looked up, their faces immediately breaking into smiles of recognition.

"Oh, Chief Potter!" said the young blonde witch. She was attractive and appeared quite wealthy judging by the quality of her robes. "How lovely to see you here. We saw your daughter Lily's presentation. She did wonderfully, I wanted to tell you."

"Thank you," Harry replied, placing a hand on Duncan's shoulders. "Can I help you with something?" he repeated.

"Oh!" said the witch again, "please allow me to introduce myself. I'm Erin Peredur and this is my father Balfour Knightely."

Harry took each of their hands.

"Surely you must have heard of him?" said Erin in a tone Harry was used to hearing from name-dropping bureaucrats. "Father is a former member of the Wizengamot representing Lincolnshire?"

"I'm sorry. I don't have the pleasure."

"It's no matter," Erin said brightly. "We simply came to watch my daughter, Eliza. She was the girl right after Duncan. I would have preferred to have her present on someone like your daughter had chosen, but Quidditch legends are always popular choices aren't they?"

"Yes, they are..."

At that moment, someone gently nudged Harry. Hermione had arrived.

She looked expectantly at the strangers...and Harry's protective hand on Duncan's shoulder.

"Er," Harry stammered, guiding Hermione to his side. "This is Hermione Weasley."

"Of course we know who you are," Erin said cheerily, her eyes travelling down to her father.

Harry's eyes did the same. Mr. Knightely was eyeing Hermione like a very large and disgusting rodent.

"Would you forgive us?" said Harry quickly. "I think the children are quite anxious to get home. It's been a long night for all of us."

"Of course," Erin replied. "Papa? Were you done talking with Duncan?"

When the old man spoke, his voice was mostly air with scratches of words woven in between. "I was just telling the lad what I remember of the Muggle war," he wheezed. "I remember it quite well. I was in the Wizengamot at the time, always popping in and out of London. It was sheer madness back then. Explosions. Those whizzing machines in the air making a horrible din. Whole city turned to rubbish overnight...and all those Muggles running around like ants trying to put it together again." He guffawed rather unpleasantly.

He placed a hand on Duncan's other shoulder, almost like a father imparting advice to his son. He stared beadily at Duncan.

"I remember coming out of the Ministry one day and finding the Muggles off their arses about the flooding of a tube station where some Muggles had taken shelter during the bombings. I remember turning to my mate and telling him that's one way of flushing the Muggles out of London, drowning them like sewer rats."

The man doubled over with a wheezing laugh. His daughter joined him reluctantly.

Harry felt sick to his stomach.

"Sir..." Harry said, almost too angry to form words, "that's.... Those kind of stories aren't appropriate for children, let alone..."

"Yes," Hermione said calmly. "I mean, the war's been over for decades and look how well the Muggles have recovered," she said with sarcastic cheeriness. "Why they've made London into one of the most recognized and vibrant cities and the world. What's more, their population hasn't been stunted in the slightest. Looks like they made it through rather well, after all?"

An awkward silence met Hermione's words.

"Well, perhaps they have," said Erin diplomatically. "It was certainly an interesting choice for Duncan to pick a Muggle as his most admired witch or wizard. Why did you pick the Muggle then, Duncan?"

"I'm a Muggle-born," replied Duncan dutifully.

"Are you now?" Erin said sweetly, her eyes widening. "Your parents approved of your choice then? They even sent you to a wizard school? ...How odd. I had thought most Muggle-born children attend Muggle schools until they are admitted to Hogwarts?"

Harry stepped in.

"His parents wanted him to experience magical life as early as possible," he said with false confidence. "Besides, Duncan's parents travel much of the year. They wanted him to have a steady routine while they were away."

"So I'm guessing...you two watch over him then?" Erin asked, giving Harry and Hermione an appraising look.

"We do," said Hermione easily, as though nothing at all were the matter. "And we couldn't be prouder to do so."

"Yes," said Erin slowly, with an almost Draco Malfoy-like drawl. "I can see that."

Harry's neck was growing warm. "Well, we must be off. Pleasure to speak with you both."

"Oh no," Erin replied, briefly retaking his hand. "The pleasure is ours, Chief Potter. Good evening."

Harry turned and placed a hand at the small of Hermione's back, guiding her towards their table. His other hand did not move from Duncan's shoulder.

"Duncan," Harry said, "I'll take you back to St. Mungo's. You did wonderfully, son."

The boy only nodded.

"Yes, you were superb!" Hermione complimented. "I was so proud of you."

She reached down and rubbed his head playfully as they stopped before the table.

Harry held her back before they reached the others.

"You," he said acerbically. "You're unbelievable."

Hermione barely had time to look affronted.

Harry seized Duncan's elbow, and with an inaudible pop, they were gone.

Harry leaned into the enormous front door of Clymene Court, easing it open. His energy seemed to have left him completely after dropping Duncan off at St. Mungo's. Yet, Harry was not given a moment to recuperate.

Lily flew out of the kitchen and stood before her father. She was not happy.

"Daddy," she said accusingly, "why did you take Duncan home before he could talk to any of us? I didn't even get to tell him he did a good job!"

"He had to go home, sweetie," Harry sighed. "It was getting late."

"But he left his schoolbag here!" she cried, looking as though depriving a boy of his schoolbag was tantamount to a crime against humanity.

"I'll make sure he gets it tomorrow, love," Harry replied tiredly, shrugging off his cloak. "You should be in bed."

Lily let out a sound that could only be described as a shriek-squeal.

She stamped her foot, white powder shaking loose from her hair and drifting towards the chandelier.

"You did a bad thing, Daddy!" she yelled.

Harry stared at her, eyebrows raised.

Lily stared back, unfazed, and then darted up the stairs.

What?

Someone coughed by the doorway into the kitchen. Ginny was leaning against the wall, an amused smile on her face.

"Don't mind her. She's just upset you didn't leave her alone with Duncan," she said.

Harry's lip curled slightly. "Not exactly high on my list of priorities."

"I know, darling," said Ginny kindly, walking forward and embracing him. "Hermione told me what happened. You just wanted to get him out of the hall, didn't you?"

Harry nodded into her shoulder. She was exactly right. After the encounter with Erin and her Muggle-hating father, Harry wanted nothing more than to remove Duncan from the auditorium. He wanted to ensure there would be no more probing interrogations about Duncan's status at the Agrippa school.

"Oh, and Hermione's waiting for you in the library."

Harry pulled back. "What?"

"She's waiting for you. Said she needed to speak with you before you turned in."

"Oh," was all Harry could say. His stomach felt uncomfortably light.

"Should I bring you two some tea or something?" Ginny asked, watching his face.

"Er, no," he said quickly, releasing her. "I'll just see what she wants and go to bed. I'm knackered."

"All right," Ginny replied, rubbing his arm. "I'm going to bed too. Come up soon?"

There was a slightly commanding tone in her request.

"Right."

Ginny turned and climbed the stairs, extinguishing the lanterns along the banister as she went. Harry proceeded towards the study in the semi-darkness.

He found Hermione sitting by the fire, a book held open in her hands.

She looked up upon hearing his footsteps and closed the book. Harry recognized the cover. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

He stopped in front of her chair.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. What do you want?"

"Are you mad at me or something?"

He hadn't expected such forthrightness.

"What's it matter to you?" Harry asked, not looking at her. "Ginny said you wanted to talk to me. What about?"

"Well, just about this," Hermione replied as though it were horribly obvious. "Usually when someone's angry with me, I like to know the reason why."

He didn't speak.

"C'mon Harry," Hermione said, smiling. She got up and reached for his arm. "You've never been one for passive aggression."

Harry took a step away from her and leaned against the end of récamier.

Hermione stared at him for a beat. "All right," she said. "I'll take a guess then."

Harry stared at the floor.

"You're thinking that we shouldn't have let Duncan present on a Muggle," said Hermione slowly. She paced before him as though she were conducting a cross-examination. "You're thinking we've opened him up to all sorts of suspicions and allegations. You're thinking maybe someone's going to look into his enrollment status. Start asking why there's a Muggle-born at Agrippa. Am I warm?"

Harry only clenched his jaw.

"I'll take that for a 'yes,'" she said pleasantly. She looked entirely unperturbed by his mood. In fact, she seemed to be enjoying it.

"And, if I'm right," she continued, "you blame me for letting all this happen."

Harry shifted uncomfortably.

"But...if you were talking to me, I could explain to you that you're worried over nothing. Everything is under control..."

"No it bloody well isn't, Hermione," Harry spat, finally looking at her. "I don't know if you're mental and really believe what you're saying or you're just willfully trying to jeopardize Duncan's future..."

Hermione smiled sardonically. Harry finally got a rise out of her.

"I can assure you it's the former minus the 'mental' business," she said.

"Christ, Hermione," said Harry exasperated. "Those purebloods at the Pageant know something is up. Do you really think they're just going to keep their suspicions to themselves? You really think no one in the audience tonight is at home talking about how some boy

presented on Winston Churchill? You think no one will look into this?"

"And what would they find, Harry?" Hermione returned. "You know the measures we've taken to keep his identity safe. Duncan's picture has never been shown in the Prophet. He isn't enrolled under his full name at Agrippa. Upon threat of expulsion, the Healers at St. Mungo's are prohibited from speaking about the Camerons. For God's sake, we even use a side entrance to return Duncan to the hospital everyday. Don't you dare insinuate I don't care about his safety," she finished coolly.

Harry shook his head. "It's not that easy, Hermione. You can't prepare for everything in every moment. This could very easily blow up in Duncan's face. And if it does, imagine the sort of ridicule and derision he'll face. Not everyone wants to go through the kind of scorn you're used to dealing with..."

"Duncan can. Duncan wants to," she said almost pleading. "You're so consumed by his security that you can't recognize, can't even see that Duncan freely chose to do what he did..."

"I think he's a twelve-year-old boy who doesn't know what he's getting into," Harry replied curtly. "You, on the other hand, know better."

"Don't speak to me like I'm a child," said Hermione darkly. "I apologize if the vibrancy of some people's beliefs offend you so much. Next time, we'll all respect your tendency to be scared shitless whenever anyone is passionate about something..."

"Don't give me that bullshit, Hermione," Harry said, rising and striding towards her. "Let's get to what this is really about." He grabbed her wrist. "Despite knowing what could happen to Duncan, you supported his idea for the pageant because you wanted to make a little splash. You secretly loved the idea that a famous Muggle would be presented at that fucking blood-supremacist pageant. Show those purebloods a little something? Just admit that's what you wanted."

Hermione didn't miss a beat. "If you're saying I appreciated the fact that Duncan's presentation added a little diversity, that it showed

that there are admirable people other than witches or wizards in this world, I won't deny that."

Harry growled and released her arm.

"You could at least have a little consideration for your case," he spat, running a hand through his hair. "Tell me, you think you'll find a fair jury when the Prophet finds out you sent a Muggle to a wizarding school?"

"You let me worry about the case, Harry," she said forcefully. "Besides, for all your talk you didn't protest when I told you who Duncan would be presenting on..."

"That's because you didn't tell me until the day before!" said Harry in exasperation.

"Well, that's because you just won't talk to me anymore!"

Harry stopped. "What? What do you mean?"

"You don't talk to me," said Hermione flatly, though there was a near inaudible waver in her voice. "You just stare angrily at me all the time. I don't know what I've done wrong. I don't know why you aren't talking to me. I'm sorry if I didn't tell you earlier, but it's only because you make it so damned difficult to tell you anything these days."

"I...", Harry stopped again.

Hermione looked down at the rug, her twisting fingers casting shadows across the floor.

"I've been busy, is all," Harry lied slowly. "So have you. That doesn't mean you shouldn't tell me this sort of thing."

"I know, Harry," said Hermione softly. "But at the same time, you have to believe I know what I'm doing. I care just as much about Duncan's safety as you do. But when he truly believes in something, I'm not going to deny him that. And Harry, he truly believed presenting on Churchill was right. I would rather have everything blow up in my face than deny him that."

"It's not just your face though. It's his too."

She shook her head.

"It is my job to protect him," she said with a fierceness that surprised him. "No matter what happens, even if something were to happen to me, Duncan will be safe. That's my promise to his family." She paused, glancing at him. "And Harry, it's not my job to always make that promise clear to you."

Harry gazed at her for a long moment. There was no hint of hesitation in her eyes shining warmly in the firelight. He slowly nodded. "I understand."

"Thank you," Hermione sighed, sounding relieved.

She took his hand.

"So can we stop fighting then, please?" she said, smiling slightly. "I cannot take much more of your silent treatment and brooding stares."

Harry blinked. Was that how he had been coming across to her the past month?

It's better than the truth: pretending not to think of her during the day and masturbating to her at night.

"We haven't been fighting, Hermione," Harry said, pulling his hand from hers. "I've just been busy. I told you."

She looked momentarily frustrated with his answer. Yet, her expression changed. She became cheerful again.

"Oh, okay. Well...then I'm glad. Let's do lunch soon? Just the two of us? Before the holidays really begin and we have no time?"

"Course," Harry replied.

"Great," she said, swinging her arms awkwardly and looking towards the door. "Then, I should get home..."

"Right."

Harry walked her to the door, again pulling his weight against the portal.

"Thanks," said Hermione as she stepped over the threshold.

She paused and turned back to him.

"You do remember the opera is this Friday?" she asked. "I hope your tux is ready?"

"Oh, right," Harry replied. He had not forgotten about the opera. It was two days away. "I think it will be. When are we supposed to meet?"

"We'll meet at my place around 6:30?" she mused. "Ron is taking me out to dinner beforehand, but we won't be late. Molly will be here with the kids?"

"Um, yeah...I think so."

Ron's taking her to dinner.

For some reason, Harry felt like something was pressing against his heart.

"Great, then we should be set," she said.

"Great."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, goodnight then," Hermione said.

Harry gave her a brief nod, preparing to shut the door. A second later, however, Hermione enveloped him in her arms. He embraced her on instinct.

She did not attempt to kiss his cheek, but Harry felt her lips graze to hollow of his neck just the same. The sensation rippled over his skin. He closed his eyes.

"See you Friday."

With that, Hermione stepped over the threshold and was whipped into the air, almost too fast to see.

He stared at the spot where she had vanished.

"Friday."

The next two days passed both slowly and quickly for Harry.

His working hours at the AD and in the field seemed to pass inch by inch. Every second dripped like wax down a candle's long stem. The hours he spent at home, however, seemed to rush past him.

Harry tried not to think about the opera. Yet, like most things he tried to avoid thinking about he thought about it anyway. Thus, Harry simply did his best to keep the upcoming event in perspective.

Realistically, the performance would probably be incredibly boring. The only person likely to find any enjoyment out of the evening was Hermione—yet that was sort of the point of the whole misadventure.

Harry supposed he could be feeling a bit of trepidation regarding the fact that he, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny would all be surrounded by Muggles for upwards of three hours. They would all have to be on their best Muggle behavior.

Considering this, the upcoming opera was really no different than hosting their recent dinner party for Dr. Srinivasan, the doctor who had saved Hermione's life. And in the case of the opera there would not even be much talking.

Thus, Harry could not quite place his uneasiness regarding the opera.

It'll be a boring evening, he reasoned. We'll get there. We'll watch the show. We'll come home. We'll all swear never to see one again. Done.

What did surprise Harry was the sudden excitement Ginny had for the opera, particularly regarding her attire for the evening. She had taken to talking about her opera gown like it was the second coming of her wedding dress.

In fact, she had yet to let Harry see the gown.

Ginny had also enlisted the help of one of her Muggle-born friends who happened to be a witch's fashion designer. On several occasions, Harry had seen both women taking tea in the parlor. Their voices would lower upon Harry's arrival and when he thought he'd politely ask about the status of Ginny's gown, he was wholly refused any details. So, he simply stopped caring, vaguely pleased and thankful that Ginny had embraced the concept of going to the opera so wholeheartedly.

The evening of the opera, Harry ate a very quick dinner. This was unfortunate because it was Molly Weasley who was doing the cooking, a treat Harry did not experience often enough. His mother-in-law had come to the house to prepare dinner and would be watching Hugo and Lily for the night.

Harry was just tucking into a delicious-smelling stew Mrs. Weasley had placed in front of him when Ginny called from the banister.

"Mum," Ginny had yelled, "let him be, why don't you? He's got to get dressed. We have to leave for Ron's in thirty minutes."

Harry and Mrs. Weasley shared a guilty glance while she shoveled parsnips onto his plate.

"You really don't need thirty minutes to get dressed, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "She's just exaggerating."

Harry was only too happy to oblige his mother-in-law. For Molly Weasley's cooking tuxedos could wait. Almost everything could wait, actually.

As it turned out, however, Ginny came down the stairs five minutes later in her bathrobe and essentially pushed Harry back into their bedroom. She said she needed the room to herself in order to get ready. She didn't want him to see her until the entire look was completed.

With no choice, Harry sullenly laid out his suit on the bed while Ginny got in the shower. He stared at the garment for a while, trying to figure it out.

Hermione had personally gone to a Muggle shop to order tuxedos for both Harry and Ron. Then, all three of them brought the suits to a very confused magical tailor for alterations. Harry thought the result was quite good.

The coat was made of rich black wool with satin-faced lapels. The dress shirt was starched white with small silver buttons. A white satin bowtie completed the look.

After putting on all the pieces Harry understood, he was left with a silky scrap of fabric that looked somewhat like a belt, but it was too thick to fit in the loops of his pants. He shrugged and tucked it into his coat pocket.

Harry galloped down the stairs again, ready to finish his supper. The children were already devouring their food upon his arrival.

Some minutes later, Harry was stuffing his face with slabs of lamb roast when Lily screamed.

"Oh mummy!" she cried, jumping out of her seat and running into the foyer.

Ginny was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

Harry, who had nearly choked on his food when his daughter shrieked, followed the others into the foyer, swallowing quickly.

Ginny was smiling as the others fawned over her, but her eyes were for Harry.

When he came to stand before her, she asked, "How do I look?"

"Stunning."

It was all he could say. And it was the truth.

Ginny's gown was made of a lustrous silver material. The strapless dress floated away from her body, layers of silk falling to the floor. The pattern woven into the fabric resembled crystallized white marble, silver gossamer threads creating an intricate web across her body. Her hair was pulled into elegant curls atop her head, a few crystals tucked in between the locks. Her hair itself appeared to be a

darker shade of red than usual, the color of deep red wine. The diamond earrings Harry had given her for their tenth anniversary hung from her earlobes.

Lily sighed. "Oh mum, now I want to come too..."

"You look pretty Aunt Ginny," Hugo said, picking up a layer of her skirt and watching it fall. When the fabric moved, it rippled like water in a clear river.

Mrs. Weasley was beside herself. "This is simply too lovely. How grand and beautiful you both look," she cooed, looking between her daughter and Harry. "Those Muggles won't know what hit them."

Ginny grinned widely. "I'm glad it was worth the effort then." She turned to Harry. "Are you all set?"

"Oh, um." He looked wistfully towards the kitchen. "Don't we need dinner first?"

"Harry Potter," she said crossly, "if you really think I'm going to eat in this dress, you're mental. Besides, if you eat a big meal before the show, you're just likely to fall asleep."

That was sort of the idea.

"But..."

"We're already running late. See? It's 6:45."

"Go on, dears," Mrs. Weasley said, gently directing them towards the door. "I have everything set here. Once the children finish eating, I was thinking we'll do a spot of decorating. Could really use some more lights, don't you think?"

"Okay, mum," Ginny said, moving towards the cloakroom, "but please don't go overboard like last year. Remember we have the New Year's Ball soon, so we'll just have to take it all down anyway."

"Of course, dear," her mother said. Harry could tell she wasn't about to honor her youngest child's request. "You two have fun and then tell me all about it. For Muggles, it does sound like a very posh event. You'll have to tell me what it's like."

They both assured her they would as they put on their coats. Ginny's coat was white cashmere with a matching muff. Harry simply put on his usual black coat, the one he used when he was around Muggles.

Mrs. Weasley and the children waved to them from the steps as Harry and Ginny prepared to disappear.

Before Harry took her hand, Ginny spoke.

"You really think it's nice?"

She meant the dress.

"Of course. You're gorgeous."

She looked down, happy.

Seconds later they were standing on the doorstep of Ron and Hermione's home.

He released Ginny's hand and moved to knock on the door. Yet, he thought better of it and reached for the doorknob. He was dismayed to find that it twisted easily in his hand.

Ron. Hermione, he grumbled in his mind. Why did no one else have his appreciation for security? He'd mention it later.

"Ron! Hermione!" Ginny called, stepping past Harry and into the well-lit foyer. "Where are you lot? Aren't we running late?"

"Oh god, sorry!" came a distant cry from up the stairs. It was Hermione's voice. "We're just finishing up! Give us a minute!"

Harry and Ginny waited, unbuttoning their coats in the warm anteroom.

Ron was the first to emerge, jauntily descending the stairs in his tuxedo. It looked rather dashing on him, which was somewhat surprising for Ron. His usual look—as described by Molly Weasley—was "adorably schlumpy."

"Very nice, mate," said Harry jokingly. "Haven't seen you so decked out in a while."

Ron shrugged, though he looked pleased. "Not since my wedding, I s'pose. God, now I remember why I've only done it once."

Ginny laughed. "How was dinner?"

"Great," Ron replied, straightening his cuff links. "We went to the Crystal Tavern in Diagon Alley."

Harry's stomach growled mournfully.

Ginny gasped.

"Oh, I've been dying to go there!" she whined, briefly glancing at Harry. "What was it like?"

"Delicious, but damned expensive..."

Suddenly, they all heard the sound of running feet from upstairs. Hermione emerged a second later—running, panting—but wearing a gorgeous blue gown.

"Okay, sorry! Sorry!" she apologized as she flew down the stairs, Harry briefly registering that she was barefoot. "It's my fault. I insisted we get dessert."

"It's no problem, dear," Ginny said, wearing a strangely satisfied smile. "We have time, don't we?"

"We really don't!" Hermione laughed, launching past them all and into the cloakroom. "Since we should probably drive there, it's going to take a bit longer...Shit!" they all heard her curse. "I didn't have time to buy new shoes..."

"Er," Ginny called, taking a few steps forward, "should I help you, Hermione?"

"No, no. No need," she replied. "My work shoes are fine."

A short silence followed, punctuated by the sound of Hermione snapping on her shoes.

Harry couldn't help noticing how differently the two women had emerged that evening—Ginny, in a resplendent gown, had descended like a duchess, perfectly coiffed and made up. Hermione had come hurdling down the stairs, feet bare and face flushed.

"Okay, okay," came Hermione's voice again. "I'm ready."

Yet, when she finally emerged, and Harry got his first clear look at her, it was odd...

It was like his mind became strangely quiet.

Harry looked at Hermione in her deep, peacock blue gown and felt an ache grow in the pit of his stomach that had nothing to do with his hunger.

The gown appeared to be made out of rich velvet. It was also strapless and dipped in the valley of her breasts. It was a simple gown, without much ornamentation, though the material did shine beautifully as she moved. Her hair, like Ginny's, was also pulled into smooth curls atop her head. Yet, perhaps because of her sprint down the hallway, a few strands had shaken loose and fell in front of her eyes. Her cheeks were pink, her lips deep rose. As for jewelry, she was almost completely bare. One simple diamond necklace hung around her delicate neck.

For one blissful moment, Harry believed it was his, the wing'd victory necklace he had given Hermione. Upon a closer look, however, Harry did not recognize it. There were more diamonds in this necklace; it was a different design.

It was not his.

The ache in his stomach hardened like lead.

"All right. Are we all ready?" Hermione asked cheerfully.

"Oh, could I just use the loo very quickly?" Ginny asked apologetically. "I rather use the one here..."

"Sure," Ron answered her.

Ginny disappeared down the hallway.

"Should I bring the car up front?" Ron asked Hermione.

"Wait a second," Harry said to the two of them, raising his eyebrows. "I want to know why the door wasn't locked."

Ron and Hermione glanced at one another, then back at Harry.

"Should it be?" Ron asked, confused.

Harry stared at them dispiritedly. "Just...could you keep it locked until Hermione's trial is over? I don't like thinking anyone could just..."

"Now, wait a second," Hermione said, imitating his seriousness, "where is your cummerbund?"

"What?" Harry said, thrown by the question.

"Where is it?" Hermione repeated. "Ron's wearing his. The look's not complete without it."

"Without what?"

"The cummerbund," Hermione said, laughing. "Don't you see the thing Ron's wearing around his waist? Didn't you have one?"

"Oh," Harry said, finally realizing what she was talking about. He pulled the satin belt out of his pocket. "This thing? I didn't know what to do with it."

"Neither did I mate," Ron smirked. "Don't really see its purpose..."

Hermione made a tsk-ing noise and stepped towards Harry.

"Give it to me," she instructed.

Harry did. He watched as her eyes travelled down to his waist, her thick lashes falling to her cheeks. Suddenly, she was wrapping her arms around his torso. She pressed herself lightly against his chest as she fastened the belt behind his back.

She smells different, he thought suddenly as her hair brushed against his chin. Lavender and cedar. Perfume?

All too soon, she had pulled away. She began straightening the pleats as Ginny reentered the room.

"What's going on?" she asked, stopping short.

"Setting things to rights," Hermione mumbled. She stepped back, satisfied. "There. We've got to look the parts, don't we?"

She caught Ginny's eye.

"Oh, Gin," Hermione sighed. "You look gorgeous. That dress..."

Ginny smiled tightly. "Thanks."

"Right, then," Ron said. "Should we get going?"

"Yes, yes," Hermione said, waving her hands. "Let's go."

The four of them proceeded out the front door (Harry locking it behind them) and around the house to the large shed where Ron and Hermione kept their car—a dark blue Audi coupe.

"Who's going to drive?" Harry asked, stuffing his hands into his coat. Blessedly, it had stopped snowing that evening but the air was now incredibly frigid.

"Oh, please can I?" Ron asked, almost skipping towards the driver's seat. "It's been so long. I like doing it..."

"But you're not good at it," Ginny said flatly.

Ron shot daggers at her.

Ginny shrugged. "Ron, you know Harry and Hermione are the better drivers. They have a...sense of how things are supposed to work."

"She's right, Ron," Hermione said, somewhat more gently. "We're not driving in the country. We're going into central London..."

Ron looked sadly at the keys still gripped in his hand. Then, he gazed mournfully up at Harry.

"God, give the man a break," Harry said exasperatedly, coming to his defense. "He drove a flying Ford Anglia to Hogwarts when he was twelve. I think he can drive to fucking Covent Garden."

"And we all know how that ended," Hermione whispered under her breath.

"All right, all right!" Ginny cried, throwing up her hands. "Let's just get in the car. It's freezing!"

They all opened the car doors. Ron and Hermione took the front, while Harry and Ginny settled in the backseat.

Ron stuck the keys in the ignition and the car roared to life. Hermione reached for the heater.

Ron began going through a mental checklist, whispering to himself.

"Brake. Gas. Lights. Gearshift. Windshield wipers."

Ginny let her head fall backwards and she closed her eyes.

"If I had known Ron was driving I would have taken a Tranquility Potion," she said.

Harry laughed under his breath.

Finally, they pulled out of the driveway (Ron pressing on the brake a little too strongly) and they melted into the darkness surrounding Ron and Hermione's home.

The trip passed uneventfully. Ginny kept a hand on top of Harry's knee as they gazed out of the windows. The snow lay pristine in many places, casting a muted and unearthly feel onto their surroundings. This changed when they got to London. Hermione gave her husband directions as they neared the center of the city, Ron growing increasingly anxious at each successive traffic signal.

"It's just up ahead of you," Hermione said to him, exasperated. "Don't you see?"

"See what? Tell me what I'm looking for, woman!"

"Now, there. You see that man? He's in the uniform...I said watch out for him!"

Ron stepped hard on the brake and they were all yanked forward.

"Sorry!" Ron said quickly, to both his fellow passengers and the alarmed traffic cop outside.

Hermione sighed, patting her hair. "He's waving you down the side street. Just follow his instructions."

Ron did as he was told. They were almost in the clear until Ron realized he would have to parallel park.

Hermione assured him he could do it and found him a spot along the wall of department store.

Ron positioned himself between the two cars and slowly began to turn in. When the cars in line behind him began blowing their horns, things started to get out of control.

"Oh my god! Oh shit! Oh shit! Why are they rushing me?" Ron shouted, his brow growing sweaty. "We're going to hit something! Oh my fucking god!"

Ginny started releasing a high whine while Hermione tried to speak sense to Ron.

"Everyone shut up!" Harry yelled over the din.

They paused just long enough for Harry to speak.

"Ron," he said patiently, "I'm going to step out of the car and guide you in, okay? Just watch me."

"Okay, mate," Ron answered shakily.

The cars were still honking, some swerving dangerously around them.

Harry stepped out onto the curb and waved Ron forward. It was actually a very tight space. Ron would have to be very careful.

As Ron backed in again, he very nearly hit the headlight of a sleek Mercedes. While Ron straightened the car, Harry subtly touched his wand inside his overcoat. The street was streaming with Christmas shoppers and Muggles in fine clothing—likely walking towards the Opera House.

"Mobilicarrum!" Harry said quietly.

The Mercedes lifted half an inch off the ground and floated backwards before settling down again.

Ron finally turned the wheels and slipped easily into space.

The others spilled out of the car, all of them looking distinctly relieved.

Ron clasped Harry's arm.

"Whew!" he cried. "That was fun wasn't it?"

Ginny and Hermione might have shared an exasperated glance.

"So, where do we go next?" Harry asked, flipping up his collar against the cold.

"I suppose we just follow the others," Hermione replied, wrapping her coat more tightly around herself.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny fell into place with the stream of Muggles walking towards the Opera House, which was about a block ahead of them. Harry and the others looked surreptitiously around themselves, probably gauging how well they fitted in with the Muggles.

Ginny clung tightly to Harry's arm. He could understand why. It was a little disorientating to abruptly reenter the Muggle world. Being outnumbered by people who talked about tax hikes, sales at Harrod's, and a myriad of other things you didn't understand was almost like airdropping into a foreign country.

"That's it," he heard Hermione say ahead of him. "Up there."

Harry looked up and felt his jaw drop.

He had never seen the Royal Opera House at night before. He had passed by the alabaster-white building on numerous occasions, but tonight its graceful columns were lit with golden light and a red carpet had been spread over the stairs leading up into the gallery. Christmas wreaths, bigger than the wheels of a semi-truck, were hung in front of the gargantuan windows.

Muggles were slowly ascending the steps, the laughter and conversation growing thick around them.

"Beautiful," Ginny whispered, impressed in spite of herself.

Soon, they had entered the main gallery of the Opera House. A massive crystal chandelier twinkled above their heads. Theatergoers were queuing up under a golden plaque emblazoned with the words "Will Call."

"Do we have the tickets?" Ginny asked Hermione.

"I have them here," she said, dropping Ron's arm and reaching into her coat. "We have a private box, so just look for a sign that says "Box Seats" or something..."

"It's there," Harry offered, pointing up.

They rejoined the throng of Muggles climbing an enormous staircase to the higher seats, while even more people flooded into the orchestra and mezzanine levels. Harry was pleased to note that most of the men were dressed identically to himself. The women wore rich gowns in jewel tones, delicate golden binoculars clasped in their gloved hands.

"I'm having a Muggle-gasm," Ron said in a carrying whisper.

Hermione elbowed him, hard.

"Ron please," Ginny said, pulling a face. "Just. Ew."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny followed the signs until they arrived at a relatively empty hallway. An usher took Hermione's tickets and handed a program to each of them as they passed.

The curved hall was lined with red and gold drapes, a small bar standing in the middle of the corridor.

"You never told me we could drink at this thing," Ron said, eagerly eyeing the liquor selection. "This night just got a whole lot better..."

"Let's find our seats first, Ronald," Hermione said practically, leading them forward.

Passing the other boxes, Hermione finally drew apart the curtains to their own compartment. It was a small room lined in red carpet. Four seats stood in a row at the edge of the box. Harry moved forward and looked over the ledge. They had a near perfect view over the stage.

The others came to stand next to Harry, taking in the overwhelming view. The ceiling was an impossibly high dome, covered in intricate ornamental plasterwork. A gold-plated Baroque medallion rested in the center of the dome, the royal crest glowing dimly in the light from below. Perhaps eight hundred Muggles were settling into the seats below, a full house. An enormous set of crimson curtains shielded the stage from view and Harry watched in amazement as at least a hundred Muggle musicians picked up their instruments in a pit below the stage. As they practiced the more difficult sections of the music and tuned their instruments, the orchestra created a strangely melodious cacophony.

"Wow," Ron breathed. "Good view?" he asked Hermione.

"Good view?" Hermione repeated, grinning wildly at him. "It's more than I could have imagined! Thank you so much, Ron!"

In horrifyingly close proximity, Harry watched as Hermione pushed herself onto her tiptoes and pecked Ron's jaw (the highest point she could reach). Ron looked pleasantly surprised and bent down to kiss her.

Harry turned sharply on his heel before he even realized what he was doing.

"Shall I get us drinks?" he asked, his eyes screwed shut. His stomach ached again.

"Yeah," Ron replied, his chin resting atop Hermione's head. "What do Muggles usually drink at these things?"

"Ron," Harry heard Hermione said softly, "let's be careful with that word, okay? I think they usually drink wine or champagne."

"Fine, then. I don't really care," Ron said, disinterested.

Thus, Harry pushed apart the curtains and paced blindly towards the bar.

What was that?

There were several people queuing at the bar. Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets and waited.

Seeing her with Ron has always been shit recently—but I've never felt physically sick about it. He clenched his jaw. I need a few drinks in me and I'll be fine.

When Harry reached the bar, he ordered a strong whiskey while the bartender prepared his wine order.

For several minutes, he stared at the amber liquid in his hand trying to get the image of Ron kissing Hermione out of his mind. Had he always been so affected by them touching?

Harry really didn't know... Ron and Hermione had never been ones for public affection. Considering how contentious their relationship usually was, it was hardly surprising that kissing and holding hands in public were not normal practices for them.

And now it is? Harry thought angrily. I didn't come to this bloody thing to see Ron have his hands all over her...

Then why did you come? another voice asked him quietly.

Harry didn't get a chance to answer that question.

At that very moment, a large entourage of people flooded into the velvet-lined hallway. At the center of the group appeared to be two couples, one older and one younger, surrounded by men in dark suits. The two couples were wearing some of the most expensive and elaborate clothing Harry had ever seen in his life. The oldest man wore an official looking sash under his suit. The younger couple was very handsome, especially the woman with long brunette hair. Her husband was balding...

Harry watched, with growing amazement, as the usher at the door bowed to the couples. All around Harry, men and women began bowing and curtsying as the ensemble passed. Even the bartender disappeared behind the bar as he lowered his head.

Harry was so shocked by what was occurring that he could only stare dumbly as the entourage passed. The oldest gentleman, the one who had a rather long nose and large ears, eyed Harry appraisingly and then turned his head with a haughty snap.

The couples and their guards disappeared into the box at the end of the hall. The other Muggles in the corridor returned to chatting amiably as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Not much of a royalist, I see?" the bartender asked Harry.

"A what?"

The bartender paused. "A royalist, man. Don't you know that was the King of England and his wife who just passed through here? They always come on opening night."

"The King of England?"

"God, you are British, aren't you?" the man said, looking increasingly annoyed with Harry. "I'm all for supporting republican values, but when your head of state passes...well, you bow is all."

"Oh, um...I'm sorry," Harry stammered, unsure what to say. "Always come for opening night, you said?"

"Yes. That was King Charles and Camilla. The other two—those be his son and his son's wife. William and Kate, the Prince and

Princess of Wales," the bartender explained, a grin spreading across his face. "Now, how long have you been out of the country, mate?"

Harry laughed awkwardly. "I haven't been. Sorry, I don't keep up with this sort of thing..."

The bartender shrugged, accepting Harry's answer. "All the better. It's just loads of gossip, you know?"

"Right," Harry replied, not really understanding. He glanced impatiently at the wine glasses placed on top of the bar.

The bartender followed Harry's eyes. "Not to worry, sir," he said. "I'll have it brought to your box. Which one is it?"

"Box Two?" Harry supplied.

The man nodded, and Harry quickly slipped off the stool and strode back towards his seat.

"Guys," Harry called, separating the curtains again.

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny turned to look at him.

"I think I just saw the King of England pass by," Harry said, barely believing himself as he said it. "They're here to watch the opera."

Ron and Ginny shared a perplexed glance. Hermione gave a little hop.

"Oh goodness!" she whispered excitedly. "I hadn't even thought they would come, though it does make perfect sense. It is the Royal Opera House after all."

"Where's the wine?" Ron asked.

"What king?" Ginny inquired, looking excitedly between Harry and Hermione.

"They're sitting two boxes down," Harry said to Hermione.

Hermione spun around and peered quite unabashedly over the ledge. Harry soon realized, however, that just about everyone was

doing the same thing. People in both the lower levels and box seats were craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the royals.

"Ooh," Hermione sighed, "I can only see Camilla right now. I want to see Kate."

"You still know about these people?" Harry asked Hermione, confused.

He, like every magical person who was raised in the Muggle world, was aware of the British monarchy. Yet as with most things regarding the Muggle world, Harry's education largely ended when he turned eleven.

"Sure," Hermione replied, one foot now dangling off the floor as she stretched over the ledge. "My mum likes to tell me about them."

"Wait," Ron said grumpily, getting out of his chair, "now you're making me want to look."

Ron nudged Hermione and dangled over the side himself.

"Where are these people?"

"Just there," Hermione said, pointing. "Oh look! They're all coming to the ledge now!"

"Oh yeah, so they are..." Ron said slowly. "God, they're funny looking, aren't they?"

"Ron!" Hermione said, aghast.

"Well, they are..."

Just then, a smartly dressed waitress entered the room with their wine order. Harry quickly paid her. As they took their first drink, the lights in the theatre began to pulsate.

"The electron-ity is going out?" Ron asked, smirking.

"No," Hermione breathed, sounding painfully excited. "It means the show is about to begin. We should get seated."

Harry immediately made a move to situate himself close to Hermione, so that he might sit next to her during the opera. Ron, however, had other ideas.

"Harry, sit next to me, mate," he said urgently. "That way we can take the Mickey out of this thing..."

Harry stopped. Hermione briefly met his eyes before she quickly looked away.

"Um, right," Harry replied, letting Ron direct him towards his seat.

Thus, Hermione sat to Ron's left and Harry to his right. Ginny settled herself on Harry's other side.

As the lights dimmed, a quiet verve seemed to crackle throughout the audience below. Harry watched as the luminous wine he held in his hand grew deeper and deeper, until he could barely see what he was holding at all.

Then, a bright spotlight shone onto the massive curtains. A moment later, a dumpy sort of man with grey whiskers and a bald head walked on the stage. The audience broke into applause, Harry and the others joining in.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the man said, speaking into a black stick Harry recognized as a microphone. "It is my greatest pleasure to welcome you tonight to the premier of our signature opera performance of the season: Verdi's immortal *La Traviata*."

Applause again.

"La Travi-what?" Harry heard Ron whisper to Hermione.

"Just read your program," was her terse reply.

Harry looked around and found his own program balancing on top of the ledge. In the faint light, Harry read the words *La Traviata* in gold lettering. An elegant woman in a red dress was on the glossy cover. A man with dark, curly hair was clinging to her as she stood transfixed by something in the distance, something the viewer could not see.

The man on stage was still speaking

"But first, I am duty bound to not only welcome you to our performance, but also to welcome our honored sponsors and guests—most estimably His Majesty the King and Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall."

A roaring applause tore through the theater, echoing high off the ceiling.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny leaned, as one, over the ledge to look at the royals. Both couples were waving politely to the audience.

As the tumult died down, the man finished his introduction. The spotlight disappeared. The hall became dark.

For one moment, the only light was a distant pinprick over the conductor's music stand.

Unsure what was happening, Harry leaned back and looked towards Hermione. He could not see her at all.

Just then, however, the lights rose and a swell of music filled the theater.

Her face became visible just in time for Harry to realize that Hermione was gazing back at him.

They both looked away.

Then, a hand took his own. Ginny's cool palm in his sweaty one.

The curtains rose slowly, almost teasingly, and revealed a near-empty stage. A single woman in a red gown stood immobile in the center. Her figure reflected off the black floor as if she were standing atop a giant looking glass.

Slowly, she began moving across the stage, as though she were on a solitary walk through a garden. All the while, the gentle and melancholy whine of violins rose from the orchestral pit.

"So," Ron whispered loudly to Hermione, "what does La Tra-vi-ata mean?"

"It means 'fallen woman' or 'the woman who has gone astray,'" she replied quietly, but loud enough for Harry and Ginny to hear.

"Fallen how?" Ron asked.

"Well...she's a prostitute."

"Whoa," Ron muttered, impressed. "That's a twist. Here I was thinking we'd be watching some prim and proper princess running around."

Harry saw Hermione smile.

"Don't get your hopes up," she said. "It's still an opera. It's not going to be lewd or anything."

"So, what's the story?" Harry asked, leaning forward.

"The plot?" Hermione laughed softly. "Just watch, why don't you?"

"C'mon Hermione," Ron mumbled. "Just tell us so we'll know what's happening. You said it'd be in another language."

"Italian."

"Right, which I'm pretty sure Harry and I don't understand..." he muttered sarcastically.

"Well, they'll give the translation..."

"How?"

Hermione looked around and then smiled. "See here?"

She pointed to a thin pane of glass that was set into the ledge in front of them. It took Harry a moment to realize it was a screen.

"Press the 'on' button and there will be the English translation," she explained.

Harry and Ron shared a look.

"Pretty good, Muggles. Pretty good," Ron grumbled.

The lights were changing on the stage. Other elements of the set were slowly being pushed into place. Mahogany settees with purple cushions. An elaborate armoire. A dull chandelier was lowered from the ceiling.

The woman touched the items of her home softly, almost forlornly, as if she was saying 'goodbye.'

"Hermione," Harry whispered. "Just give us the main highlights, so we know what's coming."

Ron nodded vigorously.

"Tell us, Hermione," Ginny spoke up.

Hermione looked seriously at Harry for a moment. But then, she sighed.

"Okay, basically the main character—the 'fallen woman'—her name is Violetta and she's a famous courtesan in Paris during the 1850s or so..."

"France?" Ron said, raising a brow. "I thought you said it was in Italian."

"It is."

"So it's an Italian play set in France?" he snickered, glancing at Harry. "Very realistic."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Would you just listen?" she said. "She's a famous courtesan but she's battling a terrible disease, probably tuberculosis." She held a finger in front of Ron's lips to stop the inevitable question. "But she's determined to believe that nothing is wrong with her. So, she throws a huge party once she's regained health. One man comes to the party—his name is Alfredo—and he's a nobleman who's been deeply in love with Violetta for a long time. He confesses this to her at the party. She sort of shrugs it off, but something about him

seems to affect her and she admits that she could fall in love with him.

"In the next act, they've moved to the countryside and are living together, perfectly happy. But soon Alfredo's father comes to visit Violetta when Alfredo is away. He begs Violetta to end her relationship with his son because it will harm the family's reputation..."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"Because she was a prostitute," Hermione replied as though it were incredibly obvious.

"Oh, right."

"So, Violetta very reluctantly agrees. She writes a farewell letter to Alfredo and leaves for Paris. When Alfredo finds the letter, he doesn't believe it. He believes she's gone back to one of her original lovers, the Baron. He goes to Paris to confront her and forces her to say she loves the Baron. Then, he shames her in front of an entire party without knowing she wanted nothing more than to stay with him. She faints and is close to death. Everyone at the party, including Alfredo's father, get's really pissed at Alfredo for doing that to Violetta and Alfredo leaves. Then, in the end, Alfredo learns what Violetta sacrificed for his family and he runs back to her. They get to reunite one more time before she dies in his arms..."

They were all silent for a moment. Harry gazed at the woman on stage. He now realized she was on borrowed time.

"Damn," Ron finally spoke. "That's a depressing story, Hermione."

She shrugged. "Life can be sometimes."

"I think it's actually quite romantic," Ginny whispered.

Harry turned to look at his wife. She looked affected by Hermione's retelling of the plot.

Yet, just as Harry was thinking this would be a rather disheartening play, the stage was suddenly flooded with golden light. The music changed. It became festive and blithe...the sound of a party about to

begin. Violetta jumped, as though awakened from a dream. She touched her hair, her cheeks, and plastered a beautiful smile onto her lips. Other actors were spilling onto the stage—men in elaborate and antiquated costumes. They swarmed around Violetta, engaging her in silent, yet animated, conversation.

Two men appeared at the back of the stage, one with an angry disposition and black hair.

The singing began quite suddenly, the chorus starting lightly and then joined in by Violetta and the two men who stood apart from the others.

It was unlike anything Harry had ever heard before. Operatic singing was boisterous and grandiose. The male singers opened their throats like bullfrogs filling pockets of air within their chests. None of the actors ever spoke like normal human beings. Rather, everything was highly stylized and melodramatic. And the words were always sung...even such simple statements as 'dinner is ready.'

Harry followed the translation on the screen as Alfredo politely admitted to Violetta that he had asked after her health everyday during her illness. Almost in the same breath, he confessed that he was in love with her. It seemed he could not contain himself around her.

That's hardly realistic, Harry couldn't help thinking. You even know the Baron is basically her boyfriend. Why would you do that?

Yet, something was happening between Alfredo and Violetta.

Harry could tell.

As the revelers recaptured her attention, Violetta gave the impression that she cared little about Alfredo's affections—after all, every man in the room was infatuated with her—but there was something there...in the way she touched him, moved around him, sung around him. She watched him. She was coming to love him.

It's all very fast, Harry thought to himself. But plays are like that, I suppose...and life maybe.

He glanced at Hermione. Her eyes were travelling between the stage and screen so quickly that he was reminded of the way Hermione used to read notes before an exam...

Finally, Alfredo and Violetta were left alone. The guests had moved into the other room for dancing.

Alfredo began professing his love again, Violetta looking increasingly uncomfortable. There was a plaintive tone in Alfredo's admission, as though he desperately hoped she would not reject him outright. Yet, there was a certain dignity in how he carried himself. He seemed entirely resigned to the fact that he loved Violetta, and whether she reciprocated or not, that fact would remain unchanged.

"One day, you, happy, ethereal,

Appeared in front of me,

And ever since, trembling,

I lived from unknowled love.

That love that's the

Pulse of the universe, the whole universe,

Mysterious, proud,

Torture and delight to the heart."

Harry thought that was a rather nice sentiment. Apparently, Violetta did not agree.

"Love, I fear, can never be,

Friendship is all I can offer.

Since love is pain and torment,

I avoid that strange emotion.

Pleasure is all I ask of life,

Freedom and joy forever!"

Again, Harry felt the irresistible desire to watch Hermione. Glancing at her, he noticed her skin glowed warmly in the light from the stage, her eyes now locked on the couple. Just as Harry looked away, however, he thought he saw Hermione turn her head in his direction.

The scene ended with Violetta handing a flower to Alfredo, commanding him to bring it back to her when the petals wilted. Alfredo looked so ecstatic with the invitation Harry was almost embarrassed for him.

Five minutes later the curtains fell and the audience gave a roaring ovation. The lights rose and people began moving out of their seats.

"It's over?" Ron asked, looking both shocked and elated. "My god, that was not as bad as I thought!"

"It's intermission, Ronald," Hermione sighed, though she looked far too content to be upset with him.

"So there's more?"

"Yes," she replied over her shoulder. She and Ginny disappeared through the partition, most likely looking for the restroom.

Ron, looking a little dispirited, glanced at Harry. "Well, we might as well get more wine while we're at it. What do you think about the play?"

Harry shrugged, following Ron out into the hallway, which was now flooded with finely dressed Muggles.

"I reckon it's okay," Harry answered truthfully. "It's pretty odd, but I mean the singing is good."

"I know," Ron said, stopping at the end of the bar. "They aren't even using a Sonorous charm. How do you think they do it?"

"Well, they're probably just trained to sing that loudly and then the acoustics of the room must be very good."

"I reckon."

They were quiet for a moment, Ron looking off to where Hermione and Ginny had disappeared.

"You know," said Ron lowly, "all these Muggle men have been staring at Ginny in that dress."

"Have they?" Harry truly hadn't noticed.

"I would say so...doesn't it bother you?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, nothing's going to happen, right? If one of them tried something, then I suppose I'd mind..."

"Right," Ron nodded, accepting Harry's answer.

Just as Ron had ordered a gin and tonic and Harry another glass of whiskey, Hermione and Ginny reappeared.

"Well, we didn't find the Princess in the restroom," Ginny said dolefully.

Hermione nodded sadly.

"They probably get their own bathroom," Ron reasoned. "What do you care about them anyway, Gin?"

"I can care, can't I?" she countered. "I mean royalty is royalty. It's not something I've seen everyday."

Hermione smiled and turned to the boys. "So, what do you guys think so far?"

Neither Harry nor Ron was given a chance to answer her. At that moment, someone tapped Harry's shoulder and he turned to find a Muggle couple staring back at him. Their eyes were wide.

They were a relatively young couple, perhaps the same age as Harry and Ginny. What's more, they were wearing very fine clothing; the man had donned an impressive three-piece suit while his wife wore an exquisite gown of dark green satin.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt you," the woman whispered to Harry while Ron, Hermione, and Ginny subtly leaned in so that they could overhear. "But I have to ask...and please don't be alarmed...are you Harry Potter?"

Harry stared blankly at the couple for nearly five seconds before he recovered. He immediately looked towards Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Their worried expressions reflected his own.

They were surrounded by Muggles.

Harry cleared his throat.

"I am, ma'am," Harry answered quietly. "Might I ask if you need to speak with me that we move a little down the hall, away from the bar?"

"Oh, of course!" the woman replied, looking eager not to offend Harry.

Harry followed the couple, turning back towards the others. Ron looked more interested in staying near the bar and convinced Ginny to keep him company. Hermione, however, walked swiftly after Harry and stopped at his side when they had reached a more secluded portion of the hall.

"Again," the woman said softly to Harry and Hermione, "I'm so sorry to pull you away from your friends. But, I just had to ask. Our daughter is a first year at Hogwarts and she's just spoken so much about you and all things magical that to run into you in person...! Well, I just had to ask for your autograph to prove to her we met you..."

Of all the things two Muggles at an opera might have asked him for, Harry had not expected an autograph.

He shared a glance with Hermione, who raised her eyebrows just slightly.

"Um, I'm so sorry Mrs....?"

"Puckle. My name is Elena Puckle. This is my husband, Thomas."

Harry and Hermione took each of their hands in turn.

"Erm, you see," Harry said uncomfortably, "I think it might be best if we found some other way to prove to your daughter that we've met. Signing an autograph might draw unwanted attention...and you see, we're really refrained from revealing ourselves to..."

"Oh, of course!" Mrs. Puckle replied looking stricken. "I had no idea it might...that it would endanger..."

"Oh, there's no danger," Harry assured her kindly, "we just prefer to keep a lower profile in...such situations. Now, you said you have a daughter in Hogwarts?"

"Yes," Mr. Puckle said, finally speaking. "She's in her first year there."

Harry smiled. "Well, in fact my son is a first year as well. So is Hermione's daughter...I'm sorry this is my friend, Hermione Granger."

Mrs. Puckle smiled broadly. "I know who you are, Ms. Granger. Perdita—that's our daughter's name—has told us about you too. She said you were a very high official in the Ministry of Magic," she finished, lowering her voice just above a whisper.

Hermione smiled, surprised. "Well, that's very nice. Your daughter must be very intelligent indeed if she's already reading about Ministry officials...can't be interesting reading for an eleven-year-old."

"Oh, I'm sure it isn't," Mrs. Puckle said warmly, "but that's our Perdita. She's always reading whatever she can get her hands on. Why, when she found out she was a witch a year ago, she immediately began reading through her spellbooks. My goodness, we must have gone to that Diagonally market at least six times before she left. It was a terribly confusing time for all of us but, of course, we're so proud and happy that she is there...though we miss her horribly."

If it was possible, Hermione looked even more elated and Harry knew why. The Puckles sounded like the perfect parents of a Muggle-born: accepting, supportive, and interested in the magical

world. It didn't hurt that Perdita Puckle sounded like a reincarnation of a young Hermione Granger.

"Oh, that's simply wonderful. She must be doing very well there with such supportive parents," Hermione effused. "Tell me, what house is she in?"

"She's in Gryffin-lore," her father answered proudly.

"Gryffindor, darling. Gryffindor," Mrs. Puckle corrected.

Harry and Hermione laughed lightly.

"That means that all three of our children are in Gryffindor, so I'm sure they know each other," Harry said. "I'll tell you what—I have to go to Hogwarts after New Year's. I'll drop in and personally seek out your daughter and tell her I met her parents..."

Mr. and Mrs. Puckle laughed.

"Oh, she would get such a kick out of that, Mr. Potter!" Mrs. Puckle cried. "That would be wonderful."

"It's Harry, please," he said to them.

Just then, the lights began flashing again. People began moving back towards the partitions.

"I'm afraid that's our signal to get our butts back in the seats," Mr. Puckle said regretfully. "It was such an honor meeting you both. I feel much more at ease about Perdita's leaving for Hogwarts when I know her world is filled with such kind individuals as yourselves."

Harry and Hermione blushed in unison.

"Yes, I really do hope we meet again," Mrs. Puckle said earnestly. "I swear I'll keep mum during Christmas about your special visit to Hogwarts, Harry. Thank you so much again."

The Puckles disappeared down the hallway. Ron and Ginny descended upon Harry and Hermione almost instantly after their departure.

"What was that all about?" Ron asked, handing Hermione her wine.

"We just met a Muggle couple that has a daughter at Hogwarts," Hermione replied. "They recognized Harry. Their daughter is in Rose's year, Ron, and she's in Gryffindor."

"Well, fuck me if this night can get any weirder," Ron said, shaking his head.

Apparently, it could.

Once more, Harry felt someone tapping him. He turned his head and saw a withered hand resting on his arm. Harry jumped away in alarm, falling into Ron.

"I'm sorry to bother you...." rasped a shrunken, elderly woman no more than five feet tall. She was wearing a black, sequined gown and heavy pearls ringed the flesh around her neck.

Harry, a little embarrassed he had jumped into Ron's arms like a schoolgirl, righted himself and addressed the woman.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said for the second time that night, "can I help you with something?"

"I was only asking," the woman said in a conspiratorial tone, "if you knew who you were speaking to just now."

Harry raised an eyebrow. This woman was obviously an old gossip.

"Speaking to?" Hermione repeated.

"Why yes, my dear," said the old woman, "the couple who just walked off, why, they are the Puckles of Southampton. They are one of the largest steel magnate families in the world. They're major funders of this opera house, what's more..."

"So they're rich?" Ron asked plainly.

"My boy, they are one of the richest families in Britain. I had just wondered," she said slowly, turning to Harry and Hermione, "if you had known what esteemed company you were keeping."

"Oh, well you're very kind to tell us, ma'am," Hermione said kindly. "Though I'm afraid the show is about to start again and we must return to our seats. Good evening."

"Good evening, dears," the woman said, smiling. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmasss," the others intoned as the old woman waddled away.

"What. The. Fuck?" Ron whispered.

Hermione sighed. "Let's just get to our seats."

"Well, so much for being undercover," Ginny laughed, as they walked back towards their seats. "Thought we were supposed to blend in..."

"It's not Harry's fault he gets recognized everywhere," Ron said sarcastically, also laughing as they filed into their seats.

Harry rolled his eyes and seated himself.

A moment later, Harry realized Hermione had beat Ron into the aisle. She was now standing in Ron's place.

"Oh, sorry Ron," she said. "You still want to sit by Harry?"

Ron paused, looking a little disappointed. "Nah, it's all right. I'll probably just fall asleep in the next act anyway."

With that, Ron collapsed into Hermione's former chair and propped his knees against the ledge. Thus, Harry was left wedged between Ginny and Hermione.

The lights were dimming.

Harry waited for the curtains to rise, but after several minutes, they had not.

The same dumpy gentleman with gray whiskers strutted onto the stage. A hesitant applause rose from the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "before we begin the second and third acts, the board of directors of the Royal Opera House has discovered that the celebrated Maddalena Giordano is in our audience tonight..."

An audible shiver went through the crowd. Harry heard several women gasp in delight.

Harry turned to Hermione beside him. She looked just as confused as he was.

"Madame Giordano, would you please join me on stage?"

A moment later, a young lady, possibly in her late-twenties, appeared between the partition in the curtains. Applause rang through the theater as she glided forward. She was slim in build. Her wavy, brown curls fell across her shoulders, only loosely pinned in several places. Her olive skin shone beautifully in a sweeping wine-colored gown.

As the applause died, the man said, "Madame Giordano is one of the most illustrious young soprano voices of this decade. She is currently the lead soprano at the Zurich Opera House and she has been kind enough to agree to give us a short performance before the resumption of the opera. If you would please, Madame?"

The woman took the microphone as the man moved several paces away.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said in a heavy Italian accent that was surprisingly low for such a slight woman. "Please understand that I did not intend to sing tonight, but Signor Calvin can be very convincing..."

A ripple of laughter rang through the audience while the bearded man looked to his feet.

"Since, I am not prepared," Maddalena continued quite plainly, "I will sing one of my favorite arias: 'O Mio Bambino Caro' from Puccini's Gianni Schicchi. Please forgive me if my voice is..." She paused looking for the English word. "Rusty? Maestro, if you please..."

Another smattering of laughter from the audience.

"Why is this happening?" Ron whispered to Hermione.

"I really don't know," she answered, watching the woman closely.
"She must be famous."

Maddalena handed the microphone back to the man. She took several paces backwards and looked towards the conductor, awaiting her cue.

When the music began and Madame Giordano sang, her husky voice transformed into something angelic and desperate. There was no translation for this impromptu performance and Harry was left to wonder what she could possibly be singing about.

Her face appeared pained, her eyes pleading. She sounded so incredibly earnest, yet whimsical, her voice caught between a begging child and a pleading woman.

"O mio babbino caro,

Mi piace, è bello, bello.

Vo'andare in Porta Rossa

A comperar l'anello!

Sì, sì, ci voglio andare!

E se l'amassi indarno,

Andrei sul Ponte Vecchio,

Ma per buttarmi in Arno!

Mi struggo e mi tormento!

O Dio, vorrei morir!"

There was a pause in the singing, Maddalena's shoulders slumping as thought summoning something within her chest.

Harry turned his head to his left.

He had meant to only glance at Hermione, to gauge what she thought of the performance. But, he found himself transfixed.

Hermione was crying.

Utterly silently and gently, but it was undeniable. She was crying, her eyes shining as a steady stream of tears ran along her cheeks and down to her neck.

Harry leaned ever so slightly backwards to see if Ron noticed his wife was crying.

He hadn't. He looked just about ready to doze off, his head throne back against the seat.

Ginny was closely watching the singer. Yet, she did not look hardly so affected by the aria as Hermione. Only Hermione was having such a reaction.

With no one there to notice her, Harry did the only thing that made sense to him.

He reached for her hand.

First, just his small finger touched her. And then slowly, he brought his entire hand to rest over hers.

Hermione did not look at him.

"Babbo, pietà, pietà!"

Babbo, pietà, pietà!"

As the last, high wavering note echoed within them, Hermione turned her hand over and entwined her fingers with his.

Harry could not look at her. His eyes fell shut for several seconds, so wonderfully strange it felt to have Hermione's hand back in his after so long. However, she soon disentangled their fingers and began applauding loudly.

The performance had ended. Maddalena Giordano had bowed and exited the stage.

From the corner of his eye, Harry watched Hermione briefly swipe away her tears, which had continued to fall until the very end of Madame Giordano's aria.

Harry scarcely listened as Mr. Calvin introduced the second and third acts and then walked off the stage. Harry was waiting to see if Hermione would replace her hand...

And to his great disbelief, she did. As the theatre grew dark, she retook his hand, weaving their fingers together again.

Harry felt that familiar bead of heat radiating under his skin. It seemed to originate from the point where their palms touched, running up his arm and settling somewhere in his chest. His whole consciousness seemed to exist in the space between their entwined hands.

Barely caring if either Ron or Ginny could see, Harry let himself revel in the fact that Hermione had reached out for him. Was it wrong to rejoice that Hermione could have been thinking of him in that moment? To think that, just perhaps, he hadn't been entirely crazy over the past month as he and Hermione had kept their distance from one another? That perhaps something like what had happened between Violetta and Alfredo was happening between himself and Hermione...? That they had gone genuinely insane together? And wasn't that so much better? To be insane, but at least not alone...

If Harry could have counted the minutes, he would have known that for twelve blessed minutes Hermione held his hand into the second act of *La Traviata*.

Harry kept his eyes on the stage, and yet saw nothing.

He knew that Alfredo and Violetta were running around Alfredo's country estate: rapturous, elated, and in love. But he could scarcely concentrate on what they were singing at all.

Every so often, Hermione would move her fingers under his palm and new rush of electricity flowed through Harry, a dark chill.

He never wanted the sensation to end.

Blissfully lost in his thoughts, Harry did not sense that a change was occurring.

On stage, an older man with a dour expression had come to speak with Violetta, asking her to break her connection with Alfredo.

Ron abruptly jolted awake, accidentally kicking the ledge.

All too suddenly, Hermione had slipped her hand from Harry's and replaced it on Ron's arm, calming her husband.

Harry felt the absence like a dull weight in his stomach.

He waited for her hand to return. It did not.

He leaned slightly forward and saw Ron take Hermione's other hand, entwining his fingers with hers.

Harry stared at their hands for a moment, feeling a flicker of enmity spark inside him. How easily Ron had taken her hand, and yet he did not ascribe any of the profound meaning and importance Harry ascribed to having Hermione's fingers laced with his.

He supposed Ron could do that casually. Hermione was his wife.

Harry turned back to the stage, disgusted with himself...disgusted with Ron.

He tried to refocus on the play.

Violetta was writing her farewell message to Alfredo. He could hear the utter despair in her voice, how her entire soul rebelled against the thought of leaving Alfredo. When Alfredo returned, Violetta could barely look him in the face. She ran out of the room without explaining the reason for her departure. Alfredo read the letter and immediately collapsed into despair. Yet, it only took a matter of minutes for despair to wrap itself in wrath.

Harry looked to Hermione's side again. Her hand was still tangled with Ron's, her other hand now resting on his elbow as if they were

lying in bed. Ron's head was leaning to one side, as though to rest on Hermione's shoulder.

Harry could look no longer.

Blindly, he reached for Ginny's hand and wound his fingers with hers. Her hand was blessedly cool and calming. He glanced up in time to see Ginny smile at him. He tried to return it as Ginny moved closer and pressed her arm against his.

The play continued.

Violetta, slowly dying, was back in the arms of the Baron. She truly looked as if she was ready to die. Her arms were held loosely at her sides and her stride was unsteady. Surrounded by merriment, she was miserable.

Alfredo arrived at the party, anguished and seemingly drunk.

Harry felt Ginny's head lower and come to rest on his shoulder. For a moment, he enjoyed the sensation of it. It was something familiar, this feeling that someone was depending on him.

He turned his head just slightly to smile at his wife. Ginny, however, seemed to take this as an indication to kiss him. She lifted her head just slightly and pressed her lips to his.

Their lips brushed and they leaned back again.

To his side, Harry heard Hermione shift in her chair.

Alfredo and the Baron were now at the gambling table as Violetta anxiously looked on. Alfredo had already won a large sum of money, a stack of notes resting by his elbow.

Harry heard a sound and looked to his left.

He immediately wished that he had not.

Ron now had his arm around Hermione's shoulders and Hermione was leaning into Ron in a very uncharacteristic fashion. It was not like Hermione to cling to anyone, not even Ron. As though in slow

motion, Harry saw Hermione raise her head towards Ron. He leaned down and kissed her softly.

Involuntarily, Harry moved towards the edge of his chair. He half wondered if he should leave the room. He felt sick. He could feel the heat radiating from his face.

But Ginny still held tightly to his hand. She looked at him, concerned.

He shook his head briefly and tried to smile. He was afraid it turned out more like a grimace.

He returned his eyes to the stage.

Alfredo had finally gotten Violetta alone to confront her.

Harry followed the translation as best he could.

Violetta pleaded with Alfredo:

"Go, thou, unhappy and forget me!

Thus degraded, go and leave me...

A sacred oath I have taken!"

Alfredo looked paralyzed with rancor.

"To whom? Tell me! Who could claim it?"

Violetta sighed, exhausted. Her reply was quiet.

"One who had the right to name it."

"Was it the Baron?" Alfredo demanded, his eyes wide.

With great effort, Violetta sang a single note.

"Yes."

It was like watching a knife pass through Alfredo. His chest seized and he turned away from the audience. Words and rage sung as one.

"Then thou lov'st him?"

Her reply was pulled from Violetta's mouth as though by a chain.

"Yes, I love him."

Furiously, Alfredo charged towards the door and threw it open, calling the revelers into the room. Turning back to Violetta, Alfredo screamed at her, expounding on her betrayal. It was made all the more poignant that his fury was communicated in the form of a strangely beautiful song. He shamed her in front of the crowd, Violetta too weak and resigned to contradict him. She was close to collapsing.

Hermione's presence seemed to force him to look back towards her. Ron's arm was still wrapped around Hermione's shoulder. But now, one hand dangled close to the fullness of her breast, which was more visible than usual in her gown.

He gazed at Ron's hand for one long moment, his thoughts colored with Alfredo's wrath.

To think that his hands touch her, Harry thought wildly. That those hands have touched her breasts. That Ron's positively ordinary lips have touched the unearthly beauty of hers...

In that moment, how wrong it seemed that the world had decided that Ron could kiss Hermione's flesh, his hands could stroke her hair. That he could lay with her in bed for hours. That he could bring her pleasure in a way Harry could not. How wrong that Ron could do all that and he couldn't. That he was left with...

With what?

He was happy, wasn't he?

Harry shook his head.

No, he was not happy. It was time he stopped lying to himself. He could lie to everyone else, but not himself. He could no longer play this game of pretend, giving the impression that he was happy with what he had. That he had everything he desired.

He did not.

He desired Hermione.

He wanted her.

Some new force directed Harry's eyes to the stage.

Alberto had just finished throwing his winnings onto Violetta's prostrate body as the guests looked on. Having insulted her already, Alfredo picked up the notes that had fallen to the ground and began stuffing them into her dress, between her legs.

In Alfredo's mind, he was simply paying a whore. A whore who had given a very good performance of being in love with him.

He continued to scream at Violetta, his chest positively heaving. His face was warped and transfigured—yet, it was a face Harry now understood. He understood that the dark gleam in Alberto's eyes was now reflected in his own. The dark gleam was an impulse Harry could now name. Something he could no longer deny feeling when he saw Hermione's hand in Ron's. When they shared a hidden smile. When they kissed.

It was jealousy.

Pure and consuming.

Jealousy.

Harry and the others descended the gallery steps in silence.

It was just past eleven o'clock.

Emerging into the cold, they paused on the steps as Muggles streamed past them and back towards their cars.

The air was frigidly sharp, but fresh.

"So," Hermione broached carefully, "how was it?"

"Better than I thought," Ginny immediately answered. Her eyes were still red from crying through the last act. "The story was quite good, if horribly sad."

"At least Alfredo knew the truth before Violetta died," Hermione said kindly.

"Yeah," Ron said, looking longingly towards the car, "but she didn't have to die. If she had been able to go to St. Mungo's they would have cured what she had like that."

Hermione smiled, though she rolled her eyes.

"Somehow, I knew you would make that point," she said.

"What did you think, Harry?" Ginny asked.

Harry looked up, surprised. He hadn't been following the conversation.

Then, he sighed, his breath visible in the cold.

"I feel bad for Alfredo," Harry said. "He had to love a prostitute, and prostitute who was dying, no less."

Hermione raised her eyebrows slightly.

"We can't always help who we fall in love with," Ginny finally said, weaving her arm through Harry's and leaning into him.

Ron and Harry nodded automatically. Hermione did not seem to agree.

"Perhaps that is true," she said, somewhat sourly. "Though, I would suppose it's possible to fall in love with the plan of loving someone, regardless of whether you know them. In that case, I suppose...you could help who you fall in love with."

Harry's brow furrowed, confused by Hermione's statement. Had that been in the play?

In the awkward silence after Hermione spoke, Harry noticed that Ginny was glaring at Hermione. Her lips were pursed, her brow tense.

Hermione appeared not to notice.

Harry and Ron shared a bemused glance. Ron simply shrugged.

"Should we get to the car then?" he said, rubbing his hands together.

"Of course," Ginny answered. If it was possible, she took Harry's arm even more tightly.

Together, the four of them descended the steps from the Royal Opera House and disappeared into the multitude of Muggles walking through Covent Garden.

Chapter 16: Anamnesis

I can never leave the past behind

I can see no way, I can see no way

I'm always dragging that horse around

All of his questions, such a mournful sound

Tonight I'm gonna bury that horse in the ground

'Cause I like to keep my issues drawn

It's always darkest before the dawn.

- Shake It Out, Florence + The Machine

Harry stared at himself in the mirror as he loosened his bowtie. Hypnotically, he laid the scrap of satin on top of the dresser. Ginny was checking on Lily, who had been put to bed hours ago.

He and Ginny had come home directly after the opera. Ginny had pronounced that she was simply too tired to sit through another harrowing car ride with Ron. Thus, Ron and Hermione left in the blue Audi coupe while Harry and Ginny found a deserted corner next to a jewelry shop and disappeared.

Mrs. Weasley had greeted them at the door.

Neither Harry nor Ginny were particularly responsive to her questions regarding the opera. Ginny had assured her mother that the performance was lovely and that they had blended in quite well with the other Muggles, until someone had recognized Harry. Harry briefly told her about the Muggle royals and the couple with a daughter in Gryffindor.

Did anything else happen? Mrs. Weasley had asked, looking keenly interested in spite of herself.

No, replied her daughter. Other than that, the night was uneventful.

Uneventful.

For Harry it had not been uneventful in the slightest...

He slowly began unbuttoning his shirt as he paced around the room.

He was agitated. He felt like he had been running a fever since the middle half of the opera...from the moment Hermione began crying, when he took her hand.

What did that mean? Harry wondered, shrugging out of his sleeves. It was a nice song, but I didn't see anyone else crying.

The truth was...there was a lot about Hermione Granger that Harry didn't understand these days. This was a jarring revelation because Harry naturally assumed he knew just about everything regarding the woman he called his best friend.

The opera proved him dreadfully wrong on that count.

He hadn't understood why Hermione cried during the opera. He hadn't understood why she removed her hand from his. Why she had kissed Ron. Why she spoke so strangely after the opera about the "plan of loving someone."

Yet, amid his confusion, something had become incontrovertibly clear, and it had taken a three-hour opera for him to finally recognize it.

How odd that all Harry had needed was an actor to perform what he was feeling, to show him the truth. That everything from the small flickers of dejection he had felt when Hermione smiled at Ron to the seething rage he experienced when they kissed that night could all be placed within the boundaries of one emotion.

Jealousy.

Has that been it? Harry wondered. All this time?

The door creaked. Ginny slipped into the room, still wearing her crystal opera gown.

She leaned against the door for a moment, watching him. He was only partially dressed.

As though directed by instinct, Harry abruptly felt he could not meet her eyes. That if he did, she would read in his face everything he had been thinking. And Harry truly did not want that.

"Long night?" he asked offhandedly, walking towards the wardrobe and removing a hanger.

Ginny gave a tired half-smile. "You could say so."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Harry replied, glancing at her before he hung up his shirt. "I told you it might be worth a look, didn't I?"

"You did," was her only reply.

Harry nodded, grinning tightly. He moved to the chest of drawers and took out his well-worn Auror Academy T-shirt. After pulling it over his head, he sat down on the edge of the bed and began removing his pants.

As he was tossing them to the side, the bed sank. Ginny had seated herself next to him, yards of silk spreading over the duvet.

"Harry," she said carefully, "I wanted to ask you... Did Hermione seem strange this evening?"

"Hermione?" His voice seemed to take on an unusual resonance when saying her name.

"Yes."

"Strange? How?" Harry answered, his face growing red. The room was dark; he prayed she wouldn't notice.

"I don't know..." She paused, watching him closely.

Harry tried to meet her gaze, but he was afraid his eyes were far too irresolute and he was communicating much more than he meant to.

Ginny sighed, turning her head. Her lips pursed.

"You noticed nothing?" she asked again, sounding disappointed.

"Well," Harry responded, feeling he had to contribute something if this conversation was going to end soon, "she did start crying during one of the songs, the one sung during the intermission."

"She cried?" Ginny repeated, incredulous.

"Yes," said Harry quickly. "Probably because she thought it was pretty."

Ginny bit her lip, as though deep in thought.

"Maybe," she said slowly. She glanced at him. "You don't think...?"

"Think what?"

Ginny shrugged. "Hermione crying...and then she was sort of rude after the show." Her eyes widened as though on cue. "Harry, do you...do you think Hermione is pregnant?"

"What?" Harry rasped, leaning away from her. "Why would you say that?"

"Well, pregnant women can cry very easily. They can get testy and angry too," Ginny explained. "Then there's the fact that she and Ron have been so intimate recently. You saw them kissing during the opera, didn't you?"

Harry felt like something heavy was pressing against his heart.

"Pregnant," he said softly.

It explains everything, he thought with unbearable clarity. Why she cried. What she said after the opera. Ginny's right. Hermione told me herself that she and Ron are having sex again. God, how could I even possibly think.... He desperately wanted Ginny to go away. He felt like his face was cracking open. She hadn't felt anything. She doesn't.... What a presumptuous shit I've turned out to be...

Then, a blessed memory floated to surface of Harry's mind, something Hermione had told him years ago in a brightly lit ward in St. Mungo's.

I'm not going to have any more children, Harry. Two is more than enough.

"But," Harry faltered, trying to regain his composure, "Hermione told me she didn't want anymore children. Hugo...Hugo's already nine, isn't he?"

Ginny shrugged. "Maybe it wasn't planned. She's been so busy lately that it's probably easy to forget a Contraceptive Spell in the morning. Besides, Hermione wouldn't consider ending her pregnancy either. She'll carry the baby to term," she said with confidence.

His last string of hope snapped. Her logic was unassailable.

Ginny sighed. "Even if it is unplanned, how wonderful to have another baby in the family! Ron and Hermione are fantastic parents. People as in love as they are, are always good parents, don't you think?"

She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"I'll try to get the truth out of her," Ginny said with resolve. "She must have been hoping to keep it a secret until after the case is done, but why should she hide it from us?" she finished cheerily.

With that, Ginny stood, the silk rustling across the bed. She ran a hand through his hair.

"This is good news," she said, as though willing Harry to think it so.

He could only nod numbly.

Ginny stepped away and walked towards the bathroom, disappearing a moment later.

After staring blindly at the floor for several seconds, Harry turned. The bathroom door was shut. Ginny was presumably washing her face.

With the few spare moments he had, Harry crumpled. He dropped his face into his arms. He felt the strangest pressure between his brows; his chest seemed to be folding inward towards his spine.

So, he thought, it wasn't anything. Nothing's changed. Hermione's still entirely committed to him. She's doing the right thing...as she always does. She's having another baby.

Only...only I've changed.

Like fog upon a river, the Fear crept upon the edges of his mind. He suddenly felt incredibly small and incredibly alone.

I'm jealous of him and his pregnant wife.

This realization fell heavy in his stomach.

Yet, what caused Harry more torment was not the miserable fact that he was still entirely enthralled with a woman he couldn't have, but rather how he must have appeared in Hermione's eyes that evening.

She must think I'm a fucking joke, he thought, his fingers curling around the back of his neck. Holding her hand and staring at her all the time. She's probably too polite to tell me I'm making a fool out of myself.

Too nice to tell me she doesn't think of me like that.

Like what?

Harry couldn't even answer his own question, so disgusted and humiliated he was with himself.

But he knew the answer:

He wanted her so desperately that time had begun to split itself between two enormous halves: The time he was with her. And the time he was not.

He wanted to kiss her. Not on the cheek. But on the lips.

To hold her. Not for a moment. But for hours.

Make love to her. Not once, but for...

Harry released a breath that rattled his entire frame.

What hurt the most was...

She did not want to do the same.

Harry was grateful for the holidays. They were always a busy time.

At the Ministry, there were functions and parties to attend, security details to organize, an uptick in petty thievery to address. Harry had lost count of the number of December evenings he had spent in the Ministry's Atrium chatting with foreign dignitaries, department bureaucrats, and various heirs to various cauldron foundries. As the head of the Auror Department, Harry knew his presence was important at these events. But that didn't mean he appreciated the drain on his time these functions represented, especially when he was forced to miss planning sessions and trips into the field.

To make matters worse, Hermione had only attended a handful of functions that season. Before his conversation with Ginny Harry might have just assumed Hermione was too busy with her casework to bother with the long evenings. Now, he could only imagine she was worried the baby was beginning to show and wanted to keep the rumors under control.

Thus, Harry endured without her.

Ginny often came along to the Ministry functions, for which Harry was exceptionally grateful. Yet, the Ministry at Christmastime always reminded Harry of his earlier days working for the government...when he and Hermione had just been starting out. She had been a new recruit to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and he had been a lower-level Auror. At that time, Harry and Hermione often came alone to the Ministry's parties, seeing as Ginny was on tour and Ron rarely chose to accompany Hermione. So during the endless parade of cocktail hours, Harry and Hermione had spent most of their time huddled together by the open bar, slowly getting sloshed and bitching about their superiors...

Now, Harry was shuttled from group to group, Ginny's hand firmly tucked into the crook of his elbow. She always seemed to know just who they should be speaking to: the son of a prominent member of

the Wizengamot, the founder of a new communications start-up, the man who owned the monopoly over the English Shrivelfig trade...

In moments such as these, spiked eggnog and champagne just didn't cut it...

Yet, at least these evenings provided a distraction.

And Harry supposed he should be equally grateful that his life at home was also making greater demands on his time.

There was a mountain of presents to buy for the children (and for the unceasing stream of in-laws Harry had inherited the day he married Ginny Weasley). By mid-December, he and Ginny had filled a small guestroom with gifts. Ginny had cast a strong Barring Charm across the door, which could only be lifted on her command. Harry, for his part, had used his Firebolt Mach7 to similarly lock the outside windows. Needless to say, his children were inventive.

Even the holiday decorations staked a claim on Harry's attention.

After the opera, he and Ginny had returned home to find Mrs. Weasley had transformed Clymene Court into a veritable winter palace. There were now real, permanent icicles wobbling along the banisters (which gave Harry a chill every time he climbed the stairs). Holly had been strung up over the lintels of almost every doorway. Most annoyingly for Harry, however, was the fact that Mrs. Weasley had bought a set of one hundred live fairies to place within the Christmas tree. This meant in addition to all the other errands Harry had to run, he now had to buy fairy food on a weekly basis.

But, Harry reckoned this was a small price to pay. Absolutely nothing could detract from the most important aspect of the holidays.

The children were coming home from Hogwarts.

The day before James and Albus arrived, Harry had ascended the grand staircase and turned right down a long hallway. James' and Albus' rooms were at the end of a curved corridor along the back of the house. Harry felt a little uneasy as he approached the identical doors on opposite sides of the hall.

Ever since the departure of both of his sons, Harry had subconsciously avoided visiting their old rooms. There was something melancholy about stepping into his sons' little worlds full of their abandoned possessions. Little worlds trapped in time, waiting for their owners' return. There was James' wood-paneled room that smelt of sweaty Quidditch pads and broom handle polish. Albus' bedroom, with its blue walls and colossal piles of books, had a more studious feel. At one end of the room there was an enormous bay window overlooking the back lawn. When Albus had lived in Clymene Court, this is where Harry usually found his youngest son.

Yet, that December morning Harry had no reason to be other than elated.

His boys were coming home.

He loved Ginny and Lily—and in many ways, it was much easier living solely with women than with men...at least it smelt better. But, he missed his sons. Most days, Hugo and Duncan easily distracted Harry from the ache of missing James and Albus, but it just wasn't quite the same...

Harry pulled back the curtains, letting light spill into their rooms for the first time in months. He cast several cleaning spells on the carpet in James' room and a few dusting charms on the bookcases in Albus'. He shut each of their doors with a soft click and proceeded down the hallway, satisfied.

As Harry descended the stairs again, meaning to make himself a spot of lunch, he felt calmer than he had in weeks. Despite the emotional havoc of recent events, Harry knew with absolute certainty that his children were his mainstay. The touchstone of his sanity. When he had all three of them together...well, they kept him grounded. Every other disturbance, worry, or predicament paled in comparison to what he considered the one true and natural role of his life—being a good father.

As Harry rounded the corner into the kitchen, he found Ginny at the table. The Sunday afternoon sun flooded onto a pile of newspapers she had spread out in front of her. A cup of tea was set off to the side.

Harry felt himself smiling looking at her. Perhaps it was the glow of knowing his family would soon be reunited, but Harry felt the desire to embrace her. He did just that, coming behind her chair and wrapping his arms around her shoulders. He buried his face into her neck and breathed in. She smelt wonderful, as usual.

Ginny stiffened in his arms, startled. She tore her eyes from the narrow columns of a sports editorial and looked up at him.

"The rooms all set?" she asked, leaning into him.

"Mmhmm," he mumbled.

Ginny reached up a hand to tousle his hair.

"What're you reading?"

"Just Gordon Randall's opinion of who the Cannons should recruit for next season," Ginny replied, smoothing her hand over the article. "There's a few Chasers at Hogwarts he thinks they should make a run for."

"Well, he would think so," Harry said dryly, though he smiled. "Isn't his daughter a Hufflepuff Chaser?"

"Yes, and he does mention her..." Ginny giggled. "He's never been one for impartiality, Gordon, so that's why he is a guest contributor."

"Right," Harry laughed, pulling back and walking towards the stove where there was still a kettle of hot water.

He had just removed a cup from the pantry when he heard Ginny push her chair back. She began clearing the papers, probably preparing to take them up to her study to examine them further.

"Oh!" she said a moment later.

Harry turned, the tea tin in his hand.

She slipped an envelope out from a small stack of Owl Post that had been hidden underneath the newspapers.

"This came for you just a while ago."

Harry took the envelope. It was narrow and made of a thinner parchment than was normally used in magical post.

"Thanks."

Ginny nodded. She flicked her wand at the tea and papers before striding out of the kitchen, her cargo following after.

Walking back to the counter, Harry turned the letter over in his hand. His own name was written on the front. He didn't recognize the handwriting.

Shrugging, Harry placed the letter on the countertop and returned to his tea. Once he had spooned the shriveled leaves into the metal ball and gingerly submerged it in water, he turned back to the counter.

Taking up the letter again, he lifted the tab to find a handwritten note inside.

Underneath the handsome masthead of the Royal London Hospital came the following:

Harry,

I know the holidays may not be the best time, but I was wondering if you had given any thought to the project we discussed? I've enclosed my mobile number. Give it a ring after reading this. I'll need some things from you. A donation for one. And the sooner the better.

Cheers,

Alex

PS – I do hope this gets to you. They gave me an owl when I joined the program, but this is the first time I've used him. I don't know if he'll find its way home... I would rather not like to lose him. His name is Carlos.

Harry paused only for a moment, his thumb running against the edge of the note. Then, leaving his tea steaming on the counter, Harry strode out of the kitchen and climbed the stairs two at a time.

"Gin!" he called down the hallway. "Is the owl that delivered the letter still around?"

"The owl?" she shouted back from her office, which was near the staircase. "No, it flew off."

"Okay," Harry shouted back, already climbing the stairs to the third floor...

There was only one Muggle telephone in the entire house. The one in Harry's study. On the third floor.

The third floor of Clymene Court was hardly used. It contained several guest bedrooms, sitting areas, and Harry's office. The office was actually situated slightly above the third floor, only accessible from a narrow staircase at the end of the hallway. The stairway itself was hidden behind a tapestry.

The children knew it was the only room in the house that remained off limits.

Indeed, very few people had ever entered Harry's study.

Brushing the tapestry to the side, Harry rushed up the wooden staircase and emerged onto a small landing. An ancient door faced him—blackened hinges and a brass doorknob shining from constant use.

Harry placed one hand on the doorknob and the other in the center of the door.

He hissed.

With a dull thud, the door and wall broke commune.

A spacious room spread out before him.

When he and Ginny had acquired Clymene Court, Harry's study had not been a study at all. The last Muggle family to have owned the

property used the room as an elevated conservatory. After decades of magical inhabitants, the room had remained untouched. Thus, when a twenty-seven-year-old Harry pushed open the rusting door, he had found a secret garden of sorts.

The floor had been littered with dead, toppled plants and fragments of broken pots. The walls were pasted over with thick ivy. Some enterprising animals had broken through the glass ceiling so that bird droppings covered significant portions of the stone floor, made earthen by the fallen soil.

The room was much changed now.

Harry himself had placed wooden slats over the floor and erected bookshelves against every wall except the far one. The enormous windows there provided an impressive view of the sloping, front lawn. The ceiling had been mended and, at Hermione's suggestion, Harry placed a Temperance Charm along the glass panels in order to keep out the cold.

It was his room now. Completely. Ginny had once called it his "man cave," a word she had quite accidentally picked up from a Muggle magazine. Ron, on his only visit to the room after it had been remodeled, commented that he couldn't understand why Harry would want to be so far removed from the happenings of the house. Isn't it isolating, he had asked.

Hermione seemed to understand, however. All she had said, holding tight to Ron's arm as they walked around the room, was that it gave Harry comfort.

How, Harry had asked.

She smiled.

"You feel most at ease when things are in your control," she said, looking straight at him. "Why wouldn't you want your study to be a room that rises above the rest of the house? One in which you have a clear view of the front lawn, like some falcon overlooking his territory?"

Harry stared at her, so she laughed.

"Of course," she continued, "practically speaking, the house is probably no more safe than if your office was in the wine cellar. But, it gives you peace of mind. I could never begrudge you that..."

Years later, Harry knew Hermione had been right.

The room did provide him a sort of solace he could not explain. Within its walls, Harry kept his most cherished possessions: a few school things from Hogwarts he couldn't seem to throw away, his medals of honor from the Auror Department, his father's Invisibility Cloak, and the destroyed Horcruxes (the ones he was able to recover at least). There was also a great store of archival records from the Auror Department. Some of the files even predated Harry's entrance into the Academy.

With the letter gripped tightly in his hand, Harry reached the enormous desk. It was intricately carved, a Muggle hunting scene immortalized in wood along the front panel. Harry reopened the Alex's letter and let its contents fall onto the worked leather desktop. He picked up a tiny slip of paper upon which a series of numbers had been scrawled.

Taking the receiver, Harry carefully dialed and waited.

Alex picked up immediately.

"Hello?"

"Alex? It's Harry."

"My God!" the doctor responded, startled. "That owl was fast!" Alex sounded like he was walking on the street. Harry could here an occasional car horn every few seconds. "I only sent him twenty minutes ago."

"Yes, they can be fast. And you shouldn't worry. Your owl—Carlos?—should find his way back to you. He's probably just off hunting at the moment."

"Oh, good. Well, listen Harry—I'm glad you called..."

Alex's voice lowered to a whisper. The background noise softened as though Alex had ducked down an alleyway.

"I've been thinking about our treatment options for the Camerons," said the doctor cautiously. "I reckon the first thing we need to do is collect blood samples..."

"Blood samples?" Harry repeated.

"Yes. Our most rational first step will be to attempt a simple blood transfusion. Do you remember what I told you about a transfusion?"

Harry did.

"You'll transfer the blood of a magical donor into the Camerons and see if it has any effect on their memories..."

"Exactly," Alex replied, sounding pleased. "That means I'll need samples from each of the Camerons. I have to determine their blood types and find proper magical donors. Now, I haven't attempted to take the Camerons' blood yet. Bringing blood-drawing supplies into St. Mungo's could prove difficult if we want to avoid detection. I was wondering if I could prevail upon you for some assistance?"

"Of course," said Harry easily, feeling as though he was arranging a sting operation for the A.D. "Since you already have access to the whole hospital, it shouldn't be a problem. I can shrink the materials so they'll fit in your pocket...or if you truly want to be safe, we can put you under my Invisibility Cloak..."

"Invisibility cloak..." Alex breathed on the other end. "I'm going to ignore the insanity you just said...but yes, that is the sort of the assistance I was hoping for."

Harry chuckled briefly, but then grew serious.

"It being the holidays, we'll have to be careful not to draw attention to ourselves. St. Mungo's is very crowded around Christmas..."

Alex interrupted him. "I actually think the Camerons' blood samples can wait until after the holidays. Right now...what I would really like is to test some magical blood samples."

Harry paused, confused. "But I thought you needed to match the Camerons' blood with a magical donor. Don't you need to test the Camerons' blood first?"

"Yes, but I'm thinking ahead to our other option..." Alex said slowly. "Do you remember the stem cells?"

"I do, vaguely," Harry answered.

The stem cell procedure Alex had described to Harry was considerably more complex than a blood transfusion. It involved collecting hundreds of magical blood samples, running a genetic analysis, and extracting stem cells from the bone marrow or spleen of a magical donor. The end result could be that the Camerons might be able to produce magical blood on their own, in essence making them magical. It was a concept Harry still could not fully grasp.

"Well, should the blood transfusion not work on the Camerons," Alex explained quietly, "in the long run, it might be more conducive to our treatment process if we begin the genetic analysis of magical blood samples. That way we can begin mapping which genes are magical and which cells we'll need to transplant into the Camerons."

"So, you're saying you need magical blood right now?"

"Yes."

"How much?" Harry asked, uncomfortable.

"Running the tests can take time," Alex said slowly. "For now, I'd just need a few test samples for diagnostic purposes...which is where you come in..."

"Where I...how do I come in?"

Alex paused. "Harry, quite frankly you're the only wizard I know...and trust. So, why not start with you?"

"You want my blood?" Harry asked incredulously, never thinking he would have to utter that sentence in his life...well, at least not since the night he was bound to a tombstone twenty-two years ago.

"We have to start somewhere," said Alex simply, sounding entirely unperturbed. "It'd be better to get more samples though. Do you have any friends who would be discreet if we tested their blood? How about that friend you kept talking about...Mrs. Weasley?"

"Hermione? I can ask her..."

"Can we trust her not to tell anyone?" Alex asked, guarded. "Since this is the Camerons' lives we're talking about..."

It was Harry's turn to interrupt.

"Hermione would roll naked across broken glass if she thought it would help the Camerons. We don't need to worry about her telling anyone."

"That was an oddly descriptive analogy," Alex replied, amused. "Okay, so bring her if you can. I know this is terribly short notice and you must be very busy, but would tomorrow work at all? I've taken the supplies to my flat in Whitechapel and it would only take a few minutes. Let me give you the address. It's very close to the Royal London Hospital. Do you know the place?"

"Oddly enough, I do," Harry sighed, pulling open a drawer and removing a sheaf of parchment. He took a quill from the inkwell and copied Alex's address.

"You'll need some time to talk to Mrs. Weasley," Alex said, thinking quickly. "Would four o'clock tomorrow evening work?"

"Let's make it earlier. The children are coming home tomorrow around three and I have a few things to finish before they arrive. How about in the morning?"

"It would have to be early. I have a shift at the hospital at eight."

"Seven then?"

"All right," Alex answered. "I hope this isn't a great inconvenience?"

"It's no matter," Harry replied levelly and he meant it.

A blood donation for the Camerons' memories. It seemed like an easy trade.

"Well...until tomorrow," said Alex, his voice wavering on the last word.

A silence followed.

Like a shadow, the significance of what they were about to begin fell upon them.

"Until then."

After speaking with Alex, Harry called Hermione.

Once he had explained his first conversation with Dr. Peck at St. Mungo's and the doctor's rather unorthodox ideas regarding the Camerons' treatment, Hermione berated him for nearly ten minutes for not telling her sooner.

When Harry was finally allowed to get to the point of his call, Hermione abruptly switched tone, sounding like a teenage girl who had just been asked to the school dance.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" she effused. "Well, of course we'll have to help him. I've long thought the Healers at St. Mungo's have given up on the Camerons." Her voice softened. "The truth is...Nicole Cameron is likely approaching permanent brain damage if we cannot wake her up soon. For all of them...it's all so..." She didn't finish. "If Dr. Peck thinks he can help them, then we've got to do the same for him."

Harry sighed, smiling. "I knew you'd say that. He wants to do it tomorrow, but he has an early shift. Can you come by his flat at seven? I'll meet you there."

"Yes, that's fine. Give me the address."

Harry repeated it to her and went to bed that night feeling uneasy.

Tomorrow morning would be his first real interaction with Hermione in several days. The first since the opera. The first since knowing she was pregnant...

Yet, despite his anxiety, there was something...Well, for instance, listening to the sound of her voice on the phone...Somehow, her voice made him feel warm in the strangest way, like there were embers in his chest.

As Harry lay under the sheets, he felt queasy...and it had nothing to do with the fact that a doctor would be sticking needles in his veins.

Harry apparated to 17 Parfett Street at 6:52 that morning.

He was a bit surprised by what he saw. Alex's neighborhood was not the sort of place he imagined an up-and-coming young doctor to live. It was obviously a working class street, lined with dour brownstones that had paint peeling off their doors and window frames. At the far end of the street, a woman wearing a burqa was pulling two small children with over-sized backpacks behind her. There was only one tree on the street, encircled by some sort of fence or small cage.

But when Harry heard a small 'pop' from behind him, he brightened, pulling his thoughts away from the surroundings.

"Herm—," he began.

But he stopped midway. As Hermione stepped towards him, another faint 'pop' issued down the quiet street and Ron appeared behind his wife.

"Ron," Harry stammered, startled. For some reason, Harry felt the need to take several steps back. "What're...what're you doing here?"

Harry hoped he sounded more surprised than accusatory.

"I asked him to come," Hermione said matter-of-factly, fiddling with something in her purse.

Harry looked between her and Ron.

"So, er," he said haltingly, "he knows?"

Ron shrugged as Hermione said, "Yes, I explained everything to him last night. After your phone call, I went to the London Library and

checked out a few books on blood typing, transfusions, and stem cells. Of course, they didn't have anything on what Dr. Peck is going to attempt with the Camerons, but I thought, at the very least, we should give him some diversity in our samples."

"Diversity?" Harry repeated.

It was no surprise to him that Hermione had visited the London Library. He knew she had been a card-carrying member since the ripe age of seven. You would think this fact would have made Hermione more in tune with "Muggle life," but as both Harry and Ron had pointed out to her at Hogwarts, the library was the absolute last place on earth to experience any sort of "life."

"Yes," Hermione said, snapping shut her bag and looking at Harry as though she was surprised he hadn't caught on. "If he's going to need to test a great deal of magical blood, we should at least give him a sample of the three main types."

When Harry stared blankly at her, Hermione sighed.

"You're a half-blood. I'm Muggle-born and Ron's a pureblood," she explained patiently. "Among us we have all three types. We should let Dr. Peck take advantage of that, should there prove to be any molecular difference between us."

Harry looked at Ron.

The redhead shrugged again. "I'm just here because she said I had to be."

"You're okay with what the doctor's going to do...Did she explain...?"

"About them maybe becoming wizards?" Ron filled in. "Yeah. I mean, it's a wild idea. It'd be fucking crazy if it works...don't really know how I feel about that. But," Ron hesitated, "this is really for Duncan, right? He's a good kid...I reckon if we can help him..."

A silence fell between the three.

Harry looked at Ron, feeling a bit ashamed at the petty resentment he had felt when Ron turned up with Hermione.

He shrugged, smiling slightly. "Right," he said. "Let's get inside."

The three moved towards the scarlet-painted doorway of Number 17, climbing the steps in unison. As they reached the landing, Harry felt a wave of warmth overtake him on that frigid alleyway. It was something wonderfully familiar, natural:

The three of them were together again. Embarking on a mission that could only lead them into unfathomable danger. Yet, there they were.

In over their heads.

Asking for trouble.

But together.

He supposed after seven years of Hogwarts, the feeling sort of stuck...

Harry was still smiling as Hermione rang the bell.

Alex answered the door almost immediately. He was wearing a pair of jeans with a white T-shirt. His hair was tousled, as though he had just rolled out of bed.

"Harry, good to see you," Alex said jovially, extending his hand. "Mrs. Weasley..."

The two shook hands.

Alex's eyes moved onto Ron, giving the newcomer a confused expression.

"This is my husband, Ron," Hermione explained cheerily, though her voice lowered as a car passed down the lane. "He wanted...he wanted to help."

Alex took in the three of them. Then, he laughed. "God knows, I'll need it," he said, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "Please come inside."

The trio followed after the doctor, Harry closing the door.

They found themselves in a rather astonishing sitting room.

For one, there was hardly any place to sit. Dr. Peck obviously did not entertain.

"Oh, please pardon the mess," Alex said, nonchalantly kicking a box out of their path.

"May I ask..." Hermione said in a tone that mirrored Harry's own bewilderment, "what is all this?"

The room contained several large video cameras, and their even larger tripods, all scattered about the room. At the far end, there was an enormous television with several imposing black boxes beneath the screen. DVDs lay scattered upon the sofa. Several teacups, filled with half-drunk tea, had been left on the coffee table, a film of mold floating along the tops.

The walls were another fascination. They were covered with framed photographs, some of which included Alex, but more of the pictures showed a beautiful woman with long brunette hair pulled into a high ponytail. Next to these, were a number of oddities: African tribal masks, Indonesian hunting weapons, hand-sewn tapestries from India. In between the innumerable books on the shelves, there were bangle boxes, clay sculptures of elephants, beaded jewelry, and—Harry was loath to think—a baby shark in a liquid preservative.

"Oh," Alex said, gazing at the room as though seeing it for the first time, "my girlfriend makes documentaries. This is her stuff."

"She makes films?" Hermione asked, sounding politely interested. "On what subjects?"

"Lots of things really," he replied, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Alcoholism in Native American tribes, female feticide in India, the famine in Eastern Africa. She's in Zimbabwe now, interviewing members of the political opposition there."

"Wow," Hermione breathed, now sounding thoroughly impressed.

Harry and Ron shared a confused, but appropriately reverent, glance.

"That's wonderful work," Hermione said excitedly, now looking at the items in the room not as the eerie oddities they were, but as if they were the relics of a saint.

Alex shrugged, looking down at the floor. "It would be, if anyone bothered to watch her films. Most production companies don't give a shit."

"Ah," was all Hermione could say.

The silence grew between them.

"So, uh," said Harry quickly, "you said you brought all the equipment for the blood?"

"Oh, yes," Alex said, immediately more cheerful. He began walking towards the kitchen. "I've been smuggling it out for a month. Want to make sure no one knows that it's missing...or at least that it's not all gone missing at once."

The kitchen, in contrast to the living room, had sunflower-yellow walls that glowed in the early morning light. Harry could see a small patch of grass through the window over the sink.

Then, Harry's eyes turned to the month's worth of loot.

Across the white-tiled counter, Harry saw several vials, syringes in plastic wrappings, a tube of cotton swathing, and a microscope next to the coffeemaker.

Harry felt distinctly uneasy looking at the needles.

"Er, Dr. Peck?" Hermione broached.

"Alex, please," he said kindly, coming to stand next to a stool that had been placed by the counter.

"Right," Hermione said, smiling anxiously. "Well, um...when Harry told me about what you're going to try to do, I have to tell you I was very enthusiastic. I'm representing the Camerons in our court, after all, just next month. I can't tell you what it would mean to me

personally...if I could...see them well again. I do...I do want to help you in any way I can. We all do."

Ron and Harry nodded in agreement.

"And that's why," Hermione continued, "I thought it best I bring along my husband. You see, he's a pureblood, meaning his whole family has been exclusively magical for generations..."

"Until you came along," Ron said fondly, taking her hand.

Harry felt a rush of blood to his face.

Hermione smiled weakly. "Yes, and see I'm a Muggle-born, while Harry's a half-blood—one Muggle-born and one magical parent. We're a mix of all the types, so if that might help in some way..."

Alex seemed taken with Hermione's earnestness. He shared a glance with Harry.

"Mrs. Weasley..."

"Hermione, please," she said intently.

"Hermione..." he said slowly, looking almost pained. "I told Harry this...I sincerely do not want to raise your hopes. In all honesty, it's entirely possible that none of this will work. Reading up on the few books I could find on wizard-Muggle relations, it appears that magic and Muggle technology do not mix well. Perhaps your blood won't act like normal blood. Perhaps I won't even be able to determine a blood type. And this is just for the blood transfusion. The stem cells could prove absolutely futile..."

Hermione shook her head, smiling. "You're trying. That's all I care about."

The doctor couldn't meet her eyes, but nodded looking at the floor. Harry understood that feeling. Whenever anyone encountered Hermione's heartfelt (but often over-earnest) intensity, it was hard not to feel overwhelmed.

"Well," Alex said, taking on a more professional tone, "shall we press on then?" He smiled. "Whether or not any of this works, we

should at least take some pride that perhaps for the first time, we will be entering magical donations into the blood registry. And perhaps...well, perhaps we can know just a little more about what sets us apart...your world and mine, I mean."

Hermione only smiled at the doctor.

"Now, I must ask," Alex continued, "have any of you eaten already?"

"I haven't," supplied Hermione.

Harry shook his head.

Both he and Hermione turned to look at Ron.

He had collapsed onto a kitchen chair. He was not a morning person.

He met their gaze with indignation. "I haven't, all right?" he replied coolly. "Just woke up fifteen bleeding minutes ago..."

"Well, perfect," Alex went on. "We'll get a more accurate read if you haven't eaten for the past few hours. Now, have any of you had your blood taken before?"

"I have!" Hermione piped up, as though she were answering one of Professor McGonagall's more difficult questions. "When I was a little girl, I had to have it done a few times."

"All right," Alex replied. "Well, for Harry and Ron, I'll just explain. It's a very simple procedure. I'll simply find a vein in your arm, insert a needle into that vein, and then draw out a small sample of the blood. I'll be able to conduct a few tests right now, but the majority of the sample I'll send off to the lab in my hospital. I've got a mate there who won't ask any questions if I give him anonymous samples. Sound all right?"

The three nodded.

Harry looked at Ron, but the redhead was now staring avidly as Alex unwrapped a syringe and screwed it onto a three-inch-long needle.

Dr. Peck turned to Harry.

"Perhaps since we started this little endeavor together, Harry, you would oblige me with the first sample?"

"Oh, um all right," Harry responded, walking towards the stool.

Doing as he was told, Harry rolled up the sleeve on his left arm. Harry didn't exactly feel uneasy until Dr. Peck removed a long strip of rubber and tied it tightly around his bicep.

Ron had moved in to watch.

Alex tapped the flesh on the inside of Harry's elbow. Harry could see two or three blue lines become visible on his pale skin.

The doctor retrieved the syringe.

He looked at each member of the trio in turn before he lowered his eyes to Harry's arm.

"Here we go," he whispered.

It was a light stinging sensation. Nothing really. But still, Harry couldn't help wincing as the needle penetrated his skin.

What amazed him was how quickly his blood filled the vial. The viscous, red liquid gushed out of him in a warm wave.

He couldn't look away.

And neither could Ron.

"Wicked," said Ron in a hushed voice. He nudged Hermione out of the way to get a closer look. "God, Harry. That's just disgusting, isn't it?"

Harry was in no mood to respond.

Dr. Peck seemed unfazed and began efficiently and methodically removing and replacing new vials of Harry's blood. Four, filled vials stood on the counter when it was all over.

After the containers were labeled, Ron was next.

Surprisingly, Ron did not seem anxious by the act of donating blood. He looked on it all with a sort of morbid fascination.

Ron's vials were labeled and it was Hermione's turn.

Finding her vein was a little harder. Alex had to pierce her skin twice in order to find it. But, she took it with little complaint.

By 7:30 that morning, twelve plastic vials of blood lay innocently on Dr. Peck's kitchen counter, gleaming in the florescent lights.

Alex urged them to sit at the table as he set apart one vial of each of their blood and laid them beside the microscope. The remaining samples he placed in the refrigerator on the egg tray. He returned with a carton of orange juice and several glasses.

"I do apologize for disturbing all three of you so early in the morning..." he said regretfully.

"Not at all," Hermione replied quickly.

Harry shrugged in agreement. Ron merely pursed his lips.

"I'm also sorry I didn't have time to whip up a decent breakfast," the doctor said, moving to the pantry. "I usually don't have time to make anything for myself. I eat at the hospital. I did run to deli a few blocks down, though. Got some bagels and cream cheese, so I hope that makes amends?"

He placed the proffered items on the table, setting the box of bagels on the violently yellow, vinyl tablecloth.

Ron immediately opened the box and removed a sizable bagel of the sesame variety.

Dr. Peck, meanwhile, began hurriedly pouring the orange juice.

"How long will it take to get the report back, Alex?" Hermione asked a minute later, taking a sip of her juice.

"A week or so, if I put a rush on it."

"And what will you be looking for?" Harry asked, dipping a knife into the cream cheese and spreading it over his bagel.

"Well, I'll have him run an entire blood work report on each of you," he said, leaning against the counter. "I'll look for any abnormalities in your blood...and by 'abnormalities' I mean anything that sets it apart from Muggle blood, I suppose. I truly don't know what we'll find until I've read the report."

"Do you really think our blood will be that different?" asked Hermione quietly.

Alex smiled wryly. "I should like to think not."

Hermione clearly expected him to say more, but the doctor remained silent staring at his drink.

A moment later he looked up, as though he had been caught daydreaming. "But," he said quickly, "I can do a few tests now, while you eat. Maybe that can give us an idea of what we're working with..."

Hermione nodded agreeably as Alex moved back towards the counter.

"What are you going to do?" Ron asked thickly through a raisin cinnamon bagel.

"It's called a blood smear," Alex replied. "It'll let me look at your blood at the molecular level."

Harry and Ron turned to Hermione simultaneously.

"It means he's going to look at the cells up close," she whispered. "It's like seeing blood in its smallest form."

"Won't it just look the same?" Harry asked just as quietly.

Hermione paused. "I don't really know," she answered reluctantly.

The three of them watched the doctor in silence as he uncapped one of the vials and dipped a needle inside. A single drop of scarlet blood dangled from the tip, which Alex then placed on a glass slide.

With expert precision, Alex touched another glass slide to the droplet of blood and swiftly smeared it across the slide. He then placed the slide under a rather large microscope.

"This is your blood, Harry," the doctor explained to his curious audience. He flipped a switch on the microscope and a small light illuminated Harry's sample.

The doctor leaned down, squinting one eye as he looked through the lens. A moment later, he stepped back.

"Well," he said smiling faintly, "it looks like healthy blood to me. Right number of red blood cells, platelets, leukocytes...Looks positively normal."

Harry heard Hermione let out an enormous sigh.

"Good job, Harry," she said, patting his arm. "Your blood is normal."

Harry looked at her strangely, wondering why she was speaking like he had just won an award.

Alex cleared away Harry's slide and began preparing Ron's. Harry and the others turned their attention back to their food, though Hermione seemed consumed by peering into the sitting room and the strange assortment of goods it held.

Finally, the doctor had prepared the slide with Hermione's blood.

He leaned down again, lowering his eye to the lens.

As Harry poured himself more juice, he noticed that Alex lingered over Hermione's blood sample more than he had with Harry's or Ron's. The doctor's lips were moving slightly.

Finally, he stepped away. Harry couldn't help noticing Alex's eyes flashed to Hermione before he removed her sample and rinsed the slides under the sink.

Slowly, he came up to table.

"Where's your loo, Alex?" Ron asked, getting up.

"Walk through the living room. Around the staircase, you'll see it."

Ron nodded and quickly left.

Alex was hovering strangely by Hermione's chair. To break the tension, Harry stood up and took his plate to the sink. As he passed them, the doctor knelt down and whispered to her.

"Hermione," he said awkwardly, "could I speak to you in the other room?"

Harry watched Hermione's face. She immediately looked alarmed, but she nodded quickly.

"If you'll just give us a minute, Harry," the doctor said, pulling out Hermione's chair for her.

Harry nodded numbly, suddenly paralyzed by the sink.

The two passed into the living room, their voices too quiet to hear.

Is she sick? Harry immediately thought. Is there something wrong with her?

He turned and looked at the microscope. Suddenly, his palms grew cold.

Could he...could he tell if she was...

Heat was rising up his neck.

Can he tell if she's pregnant?

Harry barely had a moment to mull over this alarming possibility when Ron returned from the washroom.

He looked at Harry standing alone by the sink.

"What're they talking about?" Ron asked, gesturing towards the sitting room.

Harry shrugged mechanically. "No idea."

Ron moved back towards the table and picked at the remainder of his bagel.

A minute later, Dr. Peck returned with Hermione.

Her face was as pale as a sheet.

Harry tried to meet her eyes, but she was quite purposefully not looking at him.

Alex cleared his throat and put on a smile. "Well, what do you say about a toast?" he asked cheerfully, picking up his glass from the counter. "We've just done something rather extraordinary in this kitchen, I would say. I think that deserves a drink, even if it's only orange juice."

Hermione smiled hesitantly while Ron came to stand at her side.

Harry moved towards the table as well.

Together, the four of them raised their glasses over the yellow tablecloth.

"What should we toast to?" Alex asked jokingly.

"To new friends?" Hermione suggested quietly.

"To your work, Alex," Harry submitted, his eyes on Hermione.

"No, no," Alex quipped in a mockingly elitist voice. "These are much too small. We have to toast to something much more grand."

"To magic?" Ron suggested, looping his arm around Hermione's waist.

"To science," Hermione corrected forcefully. "Science is what is going to get the Camerons through this."

Alex smiled. "To science and magic," he said with finality. "May they be more compatible than we ever dreamed."

"To science and magic," the trio said in unison.

The gentle clinking of glasses filled the kitchen of Number 17.

The week leading up to Christmas passed in a blur.

The children returned from Hogwarts and the house became truly alive for the first time in many months. The festive mood seeped into the walls of Clymene Court, the grand estate stretching like an old cat after a long sleep.

But as quickly as it had arisen, Clymene Court fell dormant again. Traditionally, the Potters spent their Christmases at the Burrow along with the other members of the Weasley clan.

This is how Harry found himself on Christmas Eve.

He was standing behind the bar the late Arthur Weasley had built in the living room shortly before his passing. Once all the children had left the Burrow and Mr. Weasley had retired from the Ministry, Harry's Muggle-adoring father-in-law had taken to several "do it yourself" projects. One of them had been constructing a bar amply supplied with both magical and more mundane libations.

From behind the bar's stone countertop, Harry stared at a handsome glass case full of fire-whiskies and more liberally spiked butterbeer. In the adjacent case were the regular assortment of Muggle liquors—gin, rum, vodka, and one very oddly shaped bottle of tequila. An entire row was dedicated to single-malt scotch whiskey.

Harry knew Mr. Weasley could not have determined the bar's contents by himself. Charlie, on a return trip from Romania, had learnt of the project and lent a hand. Apparently, the line between Muggle and magical alcohol was less strict in Eastern Europe and Charlie had acquired a wide-ranging expertise of which Mrs. Weasley did not entirely approve...

Now, Harry reached below the bar and began removing glasses—slender champagne flutes, stout whiskey tumblers and snifters, and hearty beer mugs.

Yet, Mr. Weasley's touch was all over the bar. In one drawer, there was an assortment of Muggle implements—not all of them related to

alcohol. Next a wine corkscrew, for instance, there was a penguin-headed letter opener and a nail clipper.

Harry looked around for a cleaning rag. It was still relatively early. Harry hadn't been able to sleep, so he slipped out of Ginny's bedroom and headed down to the living room at around 8:45 that morning. Mrs. Weasley had charged him last night with cleaning out the bar in preparation of the night's festivities. Percy's family would be arriving at ten that morning. Hermione's parents had to be picked up from the Ottery St. Catchpole train station at ten past noon. Ginny would be arriving in time for dinner. She had stayed back in London to conduct a last minute interview. Bill's family would be arriving at some undetermined time. Mrs. Weasley called it *temps française*.

Thus, Harry began cleaning the bar in the dim morning haze. He knew Mrs. Weasley was already awake, picking vegetables in her All-Year Garden. George had installed it for her three years ago. It kept the soil warm and fertile even in the chill December wind.

Harry heard the distant sound of a spade scooping into the loamy soil; Mrs. Weasley was still hard at work. Involuntarily, Harry brought his mind back to his late father-in-law.

He had died very suddenly.

It was about ten years back.

Mr. Weasley had been working on another one of his "projects." He was tuning up the old Ford Anglia, which had not flown since its fateful fall into the arms of a Whomping Willow. Upon Ginny's graduation from Hogwarts, Arthur had requested special permission to find the wayward vehicle in the Forbidden Forest, a request Professor McGonagall reluctantly granted.

To everyone's surprise, Mr. Weasley had found the car rather easily. He had called it fate at the time—he and the car simply adored one another. It was only natural that they should find each other after so many years.

But when Mr. Weasley had discovered the fragile Ford, it was a shade of its former glory, which was saying something. Mr. Weasley

had lovingly devoted hours to its restoration in a garage constructed behind the Burrow.

For years, Harry had found his father-in-law emerging from the shed covered in grease but invariably ecstatic with his minimal progress. No one in the Weasley family paid him much mind by then, not even Mrs. Weasley. He was simply another aging man obsessed with innocuous hobbies.

One clear day in October, Arthur Weasley had kissed his wife goodbye. She was off to visit Bill and Fleur at Shell Cottage. She wouldn't be back until the evening. Mr. Weasley, as usual, set off towards the garage for another full day's work.

He had been tinkering over the decrepit engine when a valve unexpectedly released, creating a small explosion. Mr. Weasley fell back in alarm, seemingly unscathed, but it was enough for a small clot of blood, which had been forming in his arm, to be shaken loose and travel up the narrower passageways of his brain. He had suffered a stroke and died almost instantly.

Ginny was the one who found him four hours later. She had promised to stop by and give him an autograph from one of her father's favorite retired Quidditch players. She had been writing a story on him. By the time Harry had arrived, Arthur Weasley's body had been removed to the living room. The garage was sealed shut.

Several weeks later, Percy would wander into the garage and notice that the once-flying Ford Anglia was missing. Everyone was afraid to tell Mrs. Weasley. Then, it occurred to them that perhaps she had destroyed it. No one ever asked...

Harry was running a cloth over a martini glass when he heard several pairs of feet on the labyrinthine staircase above his head. It was the children, judging the speed of the footfalls. James was the first to emerge.

He stopped short when he saw his father. Lily, Albus, Rose, Hugo, and Fred (George's son) spilled out behind him.

"Hi, Dad," the thirteen year old said brightly. "We wanted to fly before Molly and Lucy get here. Uncle Percy never lets them fly and then they start whining..."

"All right, go," said Harry, looking sternly at his oldest child with his cousins. "Grandma is out there and I better not hear that you all have been rough-housing, clear?"

"Yessir," the children intoned, filing out through the back door.

"And wear a hat all of you!" he called after them, "It's cold!"

The house fell silent once more. Harry had just retrieved another rag when a second group of people emerged from the stairway. It was Hermione, George, and Angelina.

"Hey," Harry called to them politely.

"Morning, " George responded, walking tiredly towards the bar. "You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep," Harry mumbled truthfully to his brother-in-law. "Reckoned I should start on the bar before things get too wild."

George nodded. Hermione and Angelina moved further into the living room and began shifting the furniture with their wands. They were making room for the Christmas tree, which had been chopped down yesterday and was currently leaning against the outside wall of the Burrow. They would not begin decorating it until all of the children were present to participate.

"Do you need any help?" George asked.

"Not really," Harry replied. "I think I have it covered."

George smirked, languorously leaning against the bar. "'Course you picked the easy job. I've got to help them bring down the decorations from the attic. The ghoul won't be happy about this."

"What makes him happy?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"True enough," he said pulling himself straight. "Girls," he said turning to his wife and Hermione, "should we get cracking then?"

Both women nodded and followed the redhead.

But Harry called out to Hermione.

"Hermione," he said, setting down a glass, "should you be moving heavy boxes?"

Her brow crinkled.

"Yes, because my wrist is going to get such a work out," she replied laughingly while revealing her wand.

"Right," Harry said looking down. "Er...where's Ron?"

"Asleep," she shrugged. "If he's not up in fifteen, would you go wake him?"

"Sure."

"Thanks," she said. She stared at him a second longer before turning and following the others up the stairs.

Another hour later, the entire house was bursting.

Percy's had arrived with his wife Audrey and their two girls, Molly and Lucy. There was a great jostling as Mrs. Weasley emerged from the garden to plant two enormous kisses on Percy's cheeks before she bent down and embraced her two granddaughters.

As their bags were being levitated up the staircase, Angelina and Hermione appeared carrying the last box of Christmas tree ornaments.

The cramped living room was now overflowing with half-opened boxes filled with pine garlands, glass ornaments, candy canes, and stockings.

Ron had finally stumbled down the stairs and began helping the other adults with the decorating duties. Wonderful smells were wafting in from the kitchen where Mrs. Weasley was arranging a grand lunch. Harry could smell sweet potatoes and rosemary chicken...

George, sweating slightly, returned to the bar where Harry was just replacing the glasses.

"You couldn't get me a whiskey, could you?" he asked Harry, grinning. "Not too early, is it?"

Harry glanced seriously at this watch.

"10:30? I should say not," said Harry jokingly. "Watered down?"

"Sure," the older man replied. "Must keep our wits about us today. But hurry before Mum sees."

Harry chuckled. He removed two chunks of ice from the icebox and poured a thumbnail of whiskey into a rounded snifter before adding the water.

George took it gratefully as the clamor continued behind him.

"So, how are you, mate?" George croaked after a bracing swig. "Feel like I don't see you as often as I should."

"I know," Harry said politely. "That's my fault, I'm sorry. I haven't been stopping by the shop like a I used to."

George shrugged. "We all know you're busy. Anything you can tell me about?"

Harry laughed. "If I can tell you, then you've probably already read about it in the Prophet – a few Muggle robberies, the Sleeping Hex on the Irish Prime Minister, several cases of illegally-trafficked cockatrices. Looks like the fighting ring is starting back up."

George nodded sympathetically. "Well, at least you get enough time off to come here. In truth, I was half-afraid Ron wouldn't make it. You know how Mum gets when any one of us doesn't come for Christmas. Merlin, one year we tried to visit Angelina's parents' place for the holidays. That was the last time we tried that."

Harry smiled automatically. As George took another sip, Harry asked, "What do you mean you were afraid Ron wouldn't make it?"

Harry's brother-in-law shrugged uncomfortably. "All I know is that Ron told me that Hermione really didn't want to come. Said she needed to prepare for her case through the holidays..."

"The Callahan case?"

"Of course," George replied lowly. "But apparently Ron talked her out of it. Said she needed to rest before the case or she would be halfway dead by opening arguments."

Harry looked over George's shoulder towards Hermione. She was directing her wand to fasten garlands along the top of the wall. She was smiling, but her face was wan. Uncomfortably dark circles had settled around her eyes. Harry had assumed it was the pregnancy. Yet, he supposed it was more likely that both the baby and her workload were taking a toll upon Hermione's health.

"That's for the best," Harry said uneasily. "She does need a break."

George murmured in agreement.

"She still has her security detail, right?" George asked quietly.

"Of course. They have the holidays off. Hermione's not going anywhere other than the Burrow and I'm here."

"Right."

George watched the amber liquid slosh in his glass before Harry spoke again. "Why do you ask? Have you heard something?"

He shrugged, looking reluctant.

"George," Harry said, putting a hard edge into his voice. "I need to know."

"I know everything you know, Harry," George said, resigned. "All I know is that Hermione is not exactly...popular these days. I hear some of the porters in the shop...some of the blokes I know in Diagon Alley. They don't say much in front of me. They know I'm her brother-in-law...But still, things slip out."

"Like what?"

George failed to meet Harry's eyes, looking off towards the kitchen. "What does it matter? Stupid things really. People just letting off

steam. Saying the same things they've always said—she's a Muggle-lover, she'd have us all thrown in jail if we ever looked sideways at a Muggle, that she hasn't any...pride."

"Pride in what?" Harry asked darkly.

George hesitated, this time looking at Harry dead on. "That she doesn't have any pride in being a witch."

Harry breathed deeply through his nose.

"And what do you say when you hear this sort of shit?" Harry demanded lowly.

George raised a hand in front of Harry's livid face.

"C'mon now, Harry," George said lightly, "you know I defend her when I get an opening. But that's just it: there is no opening to defend Hermione and those blighters at Magical Law Enforcement these days. No one wants to know more about the Callahan case than they already do. They see Callahan as the victim here. For fuck's sake, he was hunting down a Death Eater when he was arrested, wasn't he? It's like he's a hero more than anything..."

"And I suppose the fact that four Muggles may be permanently incapacitated has no significance here?" Harry asked sardonically.

"No, no," George said seriously. "That is horrible. It's a tragedy if you have to think about it...but like I said, no one wants to think about it. They have their hero and they have their enemy. That's how it's going to be."

"Until the trial."

"Right...we'll see if that changes things." He did not sound hopeful.

George took the last swig of his whiskey and stood up, walking around the bar to Harry's side. He rinsed the glass under the taps and began wiping it with the rag Harry had discarded on the counter.

Finishing, George leant down on his elbows, beckoning Harry to do the same.

Once Harry had lowered himself to George's height, the two looked out onto the crowded living room before them. Molly and Lucy were rummaging through one of the boxes. Audrey was trying to assist Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen to no avail. Hermione was laughing at something Angelina had said.

"Here's the thing, Harry, if we're being quite honest..." George said quietly. "Hermione just has...she has one of those faces that people would just like to punch sometimes..."

Harry's hands grew vise-like around the glass he was holding.

"Before you get upset, let me just explain," George said, anticipating Harry's reaction. "There's something about Hermione, about the way she speaks, behaves. It can rub people the wrong way. You know what I'm talking about. She's incredibly self-assured, determined, and even a little oblivious to how the outside world reacts to her." George paused. "The thing is though...Hermione doesn't care about or want the things most people obsess over. She doesn't want money, success, fame. She's an idealist. She believes in Muggle rights, house-elf liberation...the whole works. That will offend some people politically. But, I've been thinking for a while now that it may also annoy people psychologically. It's like—how do I say it? —It's like she hasn't been broken yet. Do you know what I mean?"

"No," Harry replied coolly.

George looked down at the counter for a moment.

"All I'm saying," he continued, "is that everyone has a moment where they break. We're all idealists until life decides to kick the shit out of us, you know? For me...it was when he died," George said, his voice growing softer. "When I compare my life when he was around to how it is now...well, let's just say I had a sort of happiness then that I can never get back. You can become bitter, resentful, and carry that pain for the rest of your life. If you're a strong enough person, you grow out of it. You decide to accept it and just be the best person you can. But you'll never have the same force within you, that purpose. I think Fleur would call it *joie de vivre*..."

Harry knew what George was talking about.

George had lost the will to live when Fred died. Harry had felt something similar when he saw his godfather fall through a tattered veil. The yawning horror, the overwhelming hopelessness, the bleak and seemingly incontrovertible realization that there was absolutely nothing to look forward to again.

That sort of experience...changes everyone.

But what was George implying? That Hermione had not been through something similarly harrowing? That could not be true. Harry did agree that Hermione often possessed a blatant disregard for what the public thought of her and made no apologies for her opinions. When Harry had spoken with Dr. Peck for the first time, Harry had thought he could feel the strange animus that made Hermione so fearless.

But was it right to assume she had never been broken, as George put it?

"Hermione's been through some traumatic things, George," Harry said, quietly defending her. "You forget she's seen just about everything I have. She was on the run with Ron and me all those months...she Obliviated her parents. Then there's all the shit Ron has given her over the years..."

"Hermione didn't lose anyone in the war, Harry," George answered softly. "Not anyone she couldn't live without. Obliviation spells can be removed and you certainly know Ron and Hermione have never had an...easy relationship. But, it worked out in the end, didn't it? They're happy together."

Harry nodded without really processing George's words.

His eyes were on Hermione who was holding open the door for Ron and Percy as they dragged the Christmas tree inside the house. She smiled at her husband as he passed, but Ron did not notice. She then turned her head, looking out through the doorway and onto the snow.

"You know her better than anyone, Harry," George was saying now, "and maybe that means you have difficulty finding fault with her. But, you're certainly not unaware of the fact that people can resent Hermione for her optimism...for her inability to feel intimidated.

Because when you get down to it, Hermione's not a girl who can be bought or corrupted. And that angers people who let that happen to themselves long ago..."

Harry was silent for a long moment.

Hermione had shut the door and was leaning against the glass panes, watching the others as they levitated the tree into its proper place.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Harry asked, his voice wavering without his consent.

"Because people can't help themselves," George replied. "They always want to destroy something that is pure. And I just had this feeling...the day before we came up here with the kids. I had walked into Flourish and Blotts to buy Roxanne a book in the children's section. I'm pretty familiar with that section now and that day I noticed all the copies of Hermione's book were gone. They had been removed, I guess by the manager who thought her books would turn shoppers off. It just...didn't sit well with me."

Harry stared at George.

Five years after Hermione graduated from Hogwarts she gained newfound fame as the author of a book for Muggle-born children. It was titled *The Magic in Me* and was all about learning to adjust and thrive in the magical world while still cherishing one's Muggle roots. It had garnered wonderful reviews from all the serious literary critics. It had sold out on its first day. Yet, the book was also strongly condemned by some in the pureblood community; it became yet another piece of evidence for those who wanted to depict Hermione as a Muggle rights extremist.

"I didn't know about that," Harry said almost to himself.

George nodded. "It's gotten serious, I reckon, which is why I thought I should mention it to you. I know Ron thinks Hermione is set on taking the case to trial...but like I said, you know her better than almost anyone, maybe even more than Ron. Are you sure there's no chance for a settlement? Save Hermione—and Ron and the kids for God's sake—from the sort of backlash this trial is going to stir up?"

Harry's hands felt cold. "I'm entirely sure she wouldn't change her mind now."

"So, there's no point trying?"

"There isn't," Harry sighed, moving to rinse his hands. "All we can do is try to protect her, her clients, and Ron and the kids. The rest is up to how the trial plays out."

"Do you think she can win?"

Harry looked at George, surprised by the question.

"I know she will."

Just then, the sound of shouting could be heard from outside. The adults stopped their activities just as Lily hurtled through the door.

"James and Albus are fighting!" she cried out, breathless. She spotted her father. "Daddy, stop them!"

There was a rush as the eight adults hurried towards the door, Mrs. Weasley looking exceptionally anxious. The group jostled as they ran around the house, letting Harry take the lead.

When they reached the Quidditch field it looked like the worst was over.

Fred, the oldest of the cousins present, was standing in between Harry's two sons. Rose was standing next to James and had placed a placating hand on his arm. Hugo was beside Albus.

"What is going on here?" Harry thundered as he approached them. "What did I tell you this morning?"

"It's his fault!" James yelled defensively. "Al is being git!"

There was a long scratch along James' neck where it appeared Albus had given one good return. Albus was clearly the more injured of the two. There were wet blotches all over his clothes where he had been pushed into the snow. His face was bright red and his lip was already swelling.

"You lower your voice, James Sirius. I won't have either of you talking like that," Harry said sternly. "Now, what are you going on about?"

The adults, seeing that the situation was no longer so serious, began to file away, leaving Harry to discipline his sons.

"He won't let me use the map!" Albus finally cried out since James had remained stonily silent. "You said it was for both of us and he never lets me use it!"

Harry let out a growl of frustration.

"Boys," he said warningly, "if you can't learn to use it properly I may as well just take it back."

Both boys immediately looked stricken.

Someone cleared her throat from behind Harry. He didn't even have to turn around to know it was Hermione.

"Harry," she said gently, "it's almost noon. Why don't you send the boys in to get cleaned up? We have drive down to the station in a few minutes."

His sons looked relieved at Hermione's words, but Harry wasn't finished.

"The first thing you are going to do," Harry said to them slowly, "is apologize to your grandmother. You think she invites you here and cooks you wonderful food just so you can fight in her backyard and scare her to death?" Both boys looked at the ground, shamefaced. "Then, you both are going to get cleaned up. James, you go up to your room and Albus you go to your mother's. You are not to come out until I say so. If you disobey me, you will be in even worse trouble than you are now. Is that understood?"

"Yessir," the intoned.

"All right, you can go."

The children rushed back towards the house, their brooms and the Quidditch balls strewn across the field.

Harry turned and faced Hermione and George, who were standing right behind him.

George was smirking. "It's always been a powerful thing, that Marauder's Map."

Harry rolled his eyes. "No need to tell me. I'll get to the bottom of that later." He turned to Hermione. "Just let me get my coat."

"Okay," she said, smiling softly as she turned towards the house, wrapping her sweater tightly around her small frame.

Harry and George followed more slowly behind Hermione.

George was silent, yet Harry knew he was thinking of their conversation.

Watching Hermione walk over the pristine and perfect snow, Harry couldn't help thinking of George's words either.

People can't help themselves. They always want to destroy something that is pure.

"Oh, please just stop at this petrol pump, Harry," Elaine Granger said from the back seat. "I know it's a long shot, but they may just have some."

Harry turned on his signal and pulled into the left lane as Mrs. Granger mumbled, "I can't believe you left the wine at home, Walter..."

Hermione laughed in the front seat next to Harry.

"Mum, please don't worry. No one will take it as some major affront," she said.

"Just the same," her mother replied.

Harry looked through the rearview mirror. Mr. Granger was peering out the window at the countryside. He had the good grace to look as if he hadn't heard his wife's reprimand.

Harry pulled into one of the petrol stands. They needed gas anyway and Harry pressed the cap release as the Grangers got out the car.

Hermione paused before following her parents inside.

"Thanks for coming with us," she said to him, stuffing her hands into her pockets. "I know it's a boring drive..."

"Not with you," Harry said quietly.

Hermione blinked. She smiled after a moment. "Thanks."

She turned as if to go into store but then stopped again.

"Don't be too hard on the boys," she finally said. "They're brothers. It's bound to happen, right?"

Harry shrugged as he fitted the gas nozzle into the tank. "I wouldn't really know."

Hermione bit her lip. "No, you wouldn't...and neither would I."

Harry looked up, momentarily stricken, but Hermione had already turned away.

As Harry held the nozzle in place, he watched through the window as Hermione and her mother disappeared down an aisle within the convenience store. Mr. Granger was wandering by the magazine stand.

Once the tank was full, Harry moved inside to pay with cash. He only had a little Muggle currency on him. He hoped it was just enough.

Standing in the queue at the register, Harry dazedly counted the notes in his wallet.

The middle-aged woman in front of him was buying a pack of gum and two Christmas cards. Harry looked past her, over the register. Behind the cashier, there were rows upon rows of cigarettes. Perfectly in line, behind fiberglass cases.

A gold box with blue embossing caught Harry's eye. It seemed rather pretty to him.

"Sir? Sir?"

The cashier was looking at him quite strangely.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Harry quickly. "I was at pump number four..."

The Burrow was never designed to make sense. The myriad of rooms, maze-like staircase, and the ghoul in the attic could all attest to this fact. It was the same when the Weasley clan ate dinner.

There was only one long table in the house, and when that was not enough for everyone to find a seat, people settled themselves in the living room, the tiny foyer by the fireplace, and every nook and cranny that was available.

Yet, there was absolutely no complaining. Molly Weasley's cooking, in Harry's opinion, should have its own designation in the Department of Intoxicating Substances because it was simply addicting. No one ever knew when to stop.

There were mouthwatering sausages wrapped in bacon, bushels of steaming asparagus, fields of roasted potatoes, and an endless stream of stuffing, bread sauce, and candied cranberries in between. Yet, all this played second fiddle to a stunning glazed ham that disappeared almost magically before the ravening band of Molly Weasley's children and grandchildren.

When it was finally time to decorate the tree, only the children had the energy to take to the task with enthusiasm. The adults merely stumbled into the living room, content to doze off while cradling their bellies.

Luckily, George had taken over Harry's bartending duties, so Harry sat complacently between Ginny and the Grangers while they watched the children adorn the enormous, ten-foot Christmas tree. Every few minutes, one of the children would ask for a Levitation Charm to reach one of the tree's higher boughs, a request the adults readily complied with. Otherwise, Victoire and Dominique usually obliged their cousins in placing ornaments on the taller branches.

Harry felt almost ready to nod off to the sounds of the distant Wizarding Wireless crooning out A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love when he was distracted.

An ornament broke. Harry's drowsy disposition fell away as he looked for the source of the incident. James had just pushed Albus away from the box of ornaments, and Albus had accidentally stepped backwards onto a glass bulb.

The adults looked uneasily around towards Harry and Ginny. Harry passed a look at his perplexed wife before getting up and gesturing for his sons to follow. He led them into the kitchen and pulled up a chair in front of them.

Seating himself, Harry said, "All right, boys. I let you out early so you could enjoy your time with your cousins, but now you're taking it too far. You're going to tell me what this is all about."

He raised his eyebrows in anticipation.

James began shuffling his feet, looking at the floor. Albus stood still, looking at some point over his father's shoulder.

Harry sighed. "It had to do with the map..." he began for them.

Still no response.

"Albus," Harry finally said, "you tell me what happened."

His younger son's eyes snapped to his father. "I needed the map, dad," he said quickly, without any trace of hesitation. "I really needed it and James just wouldn't give it to me, even when I explained why."

"You didn't really need it," James retorted, crossing his arms. "I needed it that night and I'm the oldest. Just because your little girlfriend got lost..."

"She's not my girlfriend!" Albus suddenly shouted.

Harry stared. It was not like his younger son to shout. He could be moody and stubborn at times, but Albus rarely ever lost his temper.

James seemed unmoved.

"Okay, hold on," Harry said quickly, "why did you need the map, Al?"

Now Albus looked uncomfortable. "My friend...she had detention with Professor Corvus. She didn't really have to go. I was the one who stole the aconite from the Potions supply closet...she just, she just took the blame for me."

Albus trailed off.

Harry wisely chose to overlook his younger son's thievery in order to get to the matter at hand. "What does this have to do with the map?" Harry asked.

"She didn't come back until very late," the boy paused. "I was worried about her, that's all. She could have been in trouble. It was after curfew and all."

Harry turned to his elder son.

"And why didn't you lend Al the map?" Harry asked directly. "You know we have the rule on emergencies. You have to give up the map."

"She was a few minutes late, is all!" James protested. "Just because he fancies a girl is no reason I have to hand over..."

"But she might have been in trouble, son," Harry said reasonably. "If Al said she was very late and it was past curfew for first years, you have an obligation to give your brother the benefit of the doubt. He was very worried and you exacerbated his worries. Surely you see that?"

James did not reply, looking anywhere but his father.

Harry leaned back in his chair.

"Look," Harry said gently, "I'm not always going to be there to help you sort this out. You two have to behave like men and manage your own problems. Now, you are brothers. That means you have to remember you're on the same side, okay? There's no reason to

distrust or resent each other's reasons for wanting the map. And I will never question your motives either, understand?"

Both boys nodded.

"Now, I want you to shake hands," Harry ordered, suppressing a smile.

James and Albus looked like they rather shake hands with an Acromantula's fang.

"Boys," Harry said warningly.

They both turned stiffly to face one another. They touched hands and stepped away.

Harry smiled grimly. "Now, please no more of this. You're with your family and it's Christmas. Don't make me tell you again."

"Yessir," both boys mumbled, moving back towards the living room.

Harry caught Albus' hand, however, as James joined the others.

"Al," Harry said, smiling, "you haven't talked much about your new friends at Hogwarts. I'm guessing this girl is a close friend?"

Albus simply shrugged.

"What's her name?"

"Perdita," he answered reluctantly.

"Oh..." Harry said quickly as a recent memory flooded his mind. "What's her last name?"

"Er..." Albus mused, "It's Puckle, I think."

"Perdita Puckle," Harry repeated. It was such an odd name that it could not be mistaken. This was the daughter of the nice Muggle couple Harry had met at the opera.

"Don't make fun of her name," Albus said reflexively. "Everyone does it. It's mean."

"Yes, it is," Harry replied. "I wouldn't make fun of it, Al."

Harry looked at his younger son in the dim glow of light from the living room. He was startled to find that Albus was blushing, or at least that his face was very red.

"Well, I'm glad you've met a nice girl..."

"It's not like that!" Albus whined shrilly, looking mortified.

"Of course it isn't!" Harry laughed. "I'm sorry. I just meant it's nice you've met a good friend. I hope I get to meet her and all your other friends soon. I'll be coming up in April, you know?"

"I know," Albus replied, looking a little embarrassed.

"All right, get back in there," Harry said, tapping the boy on the back.

It was a good time to return to living room as Mrs. Weasley was just removing the final ornament from its special box. Harry leaned against the wall at the far end of the room as the children gathered around the final piece that would complete the lavishly decorated tree.

The porcelain Christmas angel Mrs. Weasley held in her hands had an interesting history. Hermione's mother had discovered the item in an antique shop in rural France while on holiday. This was about twelve years back, just after Ron and Hermione got engaged. Mrs. Granger thought it would be the perfect gift to ingratiate herself with her only daughter's future in-laws.

At the time, Ron had only met the Grangers on three or four occasions. Hermione was often strangely protective of her parents, but once she and Ron were engaged there was really no getting around the necessity of the two families meeting. When a twenty-seven year old Hermione finally invited her parents to a joint-Christmas at the Burrow, Mrs. Granger saw the angel tree-topper as her ticket into the Weasley family's good graces.

The ornament itself was exquisite. The redheaded angel (another good sign) had a porcelain face with intricately painted features—glimmering blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and a small red mouth. The

ornament's flowing hair was delicately braided and wound around its head. She wore robes of dusted-rose satin embroidered with golden thread, fur-lining running along the neckline and hem. Finally, two delicate wings made of silver filigree, with an identically iridescent halo, completed the vision. The wings spread out like a spider's web behind the angel's dress, giving her a truly ethereal look.

When Mrs. Granger removed the angel from its box on Christmas Eve 2006, appropriately timed "oohs" and "awes" filled the room. What Mrs. Granger did not anticipate, however, was the Weasley family's confusion.

"What exactly is it?" Mr. Weasley had asked with barely-contained excitement. "What a fascinating curiosity..."

"It's obviously some sort of fairy," Ron had said.

"More like a human hippogriff," George quipped.

Mrs. Granger shared a worried look with her husband. "Why, it's an angel," she explained nervously. "It's meant to be placed on the top of the tree...it's very common...at Christmas."

"Well, it's lovely my dear, whatever it is," Mrs. Weasley had said fondly.

Molly Weasley gently took the befuddlement-inducing ornament from Mrs. Granger and levitated it to the highest most branch of the tree. The angel's head scrapped the ceiling.

Later that evening, Harry accidentally encountered Hermione and her mother in the foyer. Hermione had pulled Mrs. Granger aside in order to clarify the situation, which she did with typical Hermione bluntness.

"Mum," Harry heard Hermione say, "It's just that not many wizards—purebloods and many half-bloods anyway—know all the Christian aspects of Christmas," she explained patiently. "They vaguely know the story, of course, but they wouldn't know the significance of an angel at Christmas. They've heard about Jesus maybe a few times in their lives. But mostly they've been taught to see Christianity as some reactionary dogma that has forced wizards to go into hiding for centuries. If they truly heard the story or read the Bible they wouldn't

think it was that amazing anyway. Any second-rate wizard could have done the things he did: curing the sick, turning water into wine..."

Mrs. Granger appeared momentarily lost for words.

"Yes...yes," she finally said, eyes wide, "but he came back from the dead. You...you told me wizards can't do that."

Hermione was silent for a moment.

"Harry did," she whispered.

Harry saw Mrs. Granger's brow furrow.

"That's-that's not the same," Mrs. Granger stammered. "You told me how he...how he did that. It's not the same, right?"

Hermione smiled slightly. "No, it's not the same. But, most wizards wouldn't care to know the difference. In any case, if we're speaking purely anthropologically, from the Middle Ages onwards, the magical community in Britain has been largely a-religious. There are a few communities that still believe in indigenous animistic and pagan traditions, but they are very small in number."

"I see," Elaine Granger said slowly, trying to absorb her daughter's words.

Hermione looked at her mother with concern. "Are you all right?" she asked. "I hadn't thought you would be so surprised. You and dad aren't particularly religious, after all."

"I know, dear," Mrs. Granger replied. "I just...it's a lot to take in. They don't know any of it, that's fine. But that inevitably changes how you have to interact with people. Not that I mind if they're atheist or anything like that...but it changes things just the same: how you relate them, what moral background they are coming from. It's just...I don't know."

Hermione looked sympathetically at her mother. She reached out and touched the older woman's arm. "I know mum," she said. "I've struggled with it too. They believe in good magic and bad magic here. They believe in bonds of community, responsibility, and the

love that creates between people. They believe in keeping faith with one another...and really, that's enough, isn't it? They aren't so very different from us, then?"

"Of course, dear," Mrs. Granger replied, placated. "I hadn't meant to imply anything by it.... They are a lovely family. I'm so happy your father and I are here."

She trailed off, sounding emotional.

Abruptly, Hermione embraced her mother. "Thanks, mum. I'm glad you're here too."

"And are you happy, my Jeanie?"

"Of course," Hermione replied immediately. "I'm very happy..."

It was over her mother's shoulder that Hermione spotted Harry, who had been awkwardly trapped between the loo and the foyer waiting for the two women to finish their conversation.

Hermione grinned at him.

"Mum, how about you rejoin the others? I'll just be there in a minute."

Mrs. Granger proceeded towards the living room as Harry noiselessly stepped into the foyer.

"That was a nice bit of work you pulled off," Harry said to her slyly. "Thanks for telling her I'm different than freaking Jesus. I appreciate that."

Hermione laughed lightly. "She still looks at you a little strangely sometimes, I think. She doesn't know quite what to make of you."

"You can just tell her I'm in the same club as Jesus," Harry said sarcastically. "The Rose-From-The-Dead Society or something. It's only for heart bypass patients, messiahs, and choice boy wizards..."

Hermione laughed again, running a hand through her hair.

"Be careful. She might just believe me. But, I meant everything I said," Hermione replied more seriously. She crossed her arms and leaned against the door. "My mum has never been especially religious. We didn't go to church often when I was a kid—just Christmas and Easter. But, she's right in a sense. If you don't know the cultural-religious background of a people, it's sometimes difficult knowing on what ground to relate to them. It's a very subtle problem..."

Harry nodded as Hermione peered off towards the living room.

"You need some basis of understanding people," said Hermione quietly, almost to herself. "If you don't have one, you have to find one.... A basic foundation upon which to erect the edifice of your thoughts..."

Harry looked at Hermione strangely. "What?"

Hermione shook her head, sparing him a glance. "It just reminded me of something I read—If man were forced to prove for himself all the truths of which he daily avails, his work would never end..."

"What's that from?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't remember. The point is that I gave my mother a simplified understanding of the wizarding world. It's what she needs. If you don't have it you'll go mad trying to figure everything out for yourself...you stop trusting people."

Harry grunted in assent, bending over to pick up a coat that had fallen on the ground by the door.

"Well, you handled it very well," said Harry, standing straight.

Hermione turned her head to look at him. She stared at him for moment before she smiled knowingly.

"You would know what I'm talking about...at least to some extent," she said. "You know the mental jump that's needed to reconcile both our worlds—the Muggle and magical—to keep one foot in each."

When Harry gave her a confused expression, Hermione whispered, "You put a cross over the spot where you buried Mad-Eye Moody's eye."

Harry was momentarily stunned. The memory slowly rose to the surface of Harry's mind, seven years after its burial with scores of other memories he would rather forget.

"You saw that?" Harry asked quietly.

"I had just stepped out of the tent," she answered just as softly. "At the time, I thought best not to mention it."

"What's the point though?" Harry asked, still bewildered. "What's that have to do with your mum's problems?"

Hermione merely shrugged.

"Well, you put a cross on the tree, didn't you? You didn't put a line or a circle. You put a cross for a reason..."

Harry felt vaguely defensive as he answered, "Well, it just felt right, didn't it? What else was I going to do in that situation? I couldn't just leave it unmarked.... He was a great man."

"Yes," Hermione said reasonably, "but he was a pureblood, which definitely means he wasn't a Christian. You couldn't have known if Mad-Eye would have found that offensive, having a Muggle symbol over his final resting place. It'd be like being a devout Christian and having someone place a star and crescent over your grave..."

Harry shrugged, looking away from her.

"I did what I felt was right."

Hermione sighed, pushing herself off from the door and coming around to face him.

"I know," she said, taking his hand. "I get it. I would have done the same."

She pulled him forward. Back towards the living room. Back towards the others.

Harry could feel the cool band of her engagement ring pressing into his palm.

"But," she said, smiling, "we're the only ones here, besides my parents, who would have thought to do so..."

Twelve years later that fact was still essentially true.

Lost in his memories, Harry barely realized that the same ornament that had caused his sudden reminiscing was now sitting atop the tree. Everyone had settled back to admire the effect, the only light remaining in the room now coming from the tree and fireplace. Lily had nestled herself into her mother's lap and was slowly nodding off on her shoulder. Hugo was dutifully playing wizard chess with Molly as Lucy looked on. Hugo was a much better player than either of his older cousins, a trait he undoubtedly inherited from his masterful father. Harry was pleased to see that Fred, James, and Albus had begun a game of Exploding Snap in one corner. He hoped that meant his sons had put their squabble behind them.

The Grangers were engaged in a relaxed conversation with Angelina, who had taken to Hermione's parents ever since she married George. Ron was speaking with Bill and Fleur. Bill's hair was much shorter these days, his hairline inching ever upwards. The long scars running from his left temple down his neck were especially visible in the firelight from the hearth. While Ron's attentions seemed inadvertently fixed upon Fleur, she looked positively bored, looking out onto her surroundings with a glazed—yet undeniably breathtaking—expression.

Harry scanned the room, already knowing what he was looking for.

He found her sitting behind the bar.

She had been speaking with Audrey, who had just excused herself to use the washroom.

Harry and Hermione were apart from the others now and Harry watched her from across the room. She was staring off towards the others, but her mind seemed elsewhere. Harry gazed at her as she ran a finger along the rim of her wineglass. Her face glowed softly in

the light from the illuminated tree and hearth. The entire ebb and flow of the party seemed to pass over her; she took none of it in.

As Harry watched her, all the feelings he kept to himself—acknowledging their existence only within the safe confines of his mind—would overtake him. Everything he had felt at the opera—the lust, the rage, the envy, the guilt. He wryly realized it didn't matter if Hermione was wearing a gorgeous and revealing opera gown or an oversized Christmas sweater (as she was wearing now). He still loved looking at her. Still needed to look at her.

He thought of the gift he had gotten her—a handsome quill holder with her name engraved on the side—that now sat waiting beneath the Christmas tree. Harry hoped she would use it during the trial and that in the trial's more difficult moments, she might look down at her quill and remember him, remember he was behind her.

It seemed as if Harry's thoughts had been stolen from his mind as Mrs. Weasley stood up and faced the group.

"It's almost time for the children's bedtime," she said sleepily, smoothing out her housedress. "Why don't we have each one of us open a present before we turn in?"

A screech went up from the children while the adults grumbled in assent. Harry went to seat himself next to Ginny as his wife awakened their youngest child.

"Lily, darling," she said to her, "go and find your daddy and I a present to open. Then, it's off to bed."

"Okay, mummy," said Lily, who despite her sleepiness immediately perked up at the sound of "presents."

The children stumbled towards the small mountain of gifts crammed into every free space under and around the tree. Shrieks of joy would emit every few seconds when the children discovered a present addressed in their respective names. Finally, Lily unearthed herself carrying two presents. She passed one to Harry and one to her mother.

Ginny smirked. "Mine's from Mum," she said. "I can only guess..."

Harry knew she was being sarcastic. There was only one thing it could possibly be: an infamous Weasley sweater with a large letter 'G.'

Harry turned to his own present. His heartbeat jolted upon seeing the tag.

To Harry with love, Hermione.

His fingers felt cold again as he touched the heavy parcel, wondering what was inside.

Slowly, he ripped off its wrappings.

A book fell into his hands.

Reflections on Wizard-Muggle Relations: From Antiquity to the Present Day by Gretchen Ohlen.

Harry stared numbly at the book, almost expecting it to transform into something else for there was no way that this could be it, right? He couldn't quite pin down his enormous disappointment. Hermione had certainly given him books in the past—books annoyingly heavier than the one he held now. But...he just expected. He didn't know...something different.

"What's that?" Ginny asked curiously, leaning over.

"Hermione's gift."

She read the book's title and smiled. She then looked away, seemingly satisfied.

Harry searched the room for Hermione. He found her sitting on the arm of the sofa next to Ron. She was holding a rectangular, velvet jewelry box as Ron leaned over and extracted its contents. It was a delicate golden bracelet, the design of which Harry could not make out in the dim lighting. He did see Hermione hold out her wrist as Ron gently fastened the bracelet before bending down to kiss her cheek.

Harry looked back at the book in his hands, feeling nauseous. He got up quickly, leaving Gretchen Ohlen's work lying on the couch next to Ginny.

"Where are you going?" Ginny asked, concerned.

"Just the loo," he answered with as much nonchalance as possible.
"Just give me a minute."

Ginny nodded and Harry strode out of the living room without looking back, sidestepping his nieces and nephews as they opened their newfound treasures on the floor.

Harry did not go to the washroom, however. He walked straight past it and stepped out onto the porch. It was exceedingly cold, Harry noted, as the back door swung shut behind him, but somehow the frigid air was exactly what he needed. He took a few steps forward and placed his hands on the railings, looking down at the ground.

He closed his eyes, releasing an enormous breath. He then looked up only to see miles upon miles of snow covered plains and hillocks. A still, barren place. Harry ran his hands down the sides of his coat, stopping when he felt something protruding from one of his pockets.

Placing his hand inside he pulled out a gold cigarette carton with a blue, embossed design. He ripped open the package so that twelve perfectly in-line cigarettes revealed themselves. Hands shaking slightly in the cold, Harry removed one and brought it to his lips. He then took out his wand.

"Incendio," he said softly, directing the tip to touch the end of the cigarette. He breathed in deeply only to feel the sudden and violent need to cough. He had not smoked in many years, not since he lived in the East End of London after graduating from Hogwarts. Smoking Muggle cigarettes had been somewhat of a trend at the time and Harry couldn't say he disliked it. There was something calming about it, but ultimately he preferred a good fly around the Quidditch pitch to relieve his stress.

Having composed himself, Harry brought the cigarette to his lips once more. He breathed in, this time the smoke filling him much more smoothly. He watched as he released the stream of smoke and it disappeared into the clear night sky.

"I didn't know you were smoking again," a voice said from behind him.

Harry spun on his heel. Hermione was leaning against the doorframe, an amused look on her face.

"I'm not," Harry said shakily, taking another drag.

Hermione said nothing as she walked forward, quietly shutting the door behind her.

"Then you wouldn't mind if I had one?" she said, stopping next to him and leaning down so that her elbows rested on the railings.

"Not at all," Harry said coolly. He removed the carton from his pocket and offered it to her.

She took it, placing a cigarette between her lips. Harry was momentarily fixated by the way her soft lips encircled it, the white cigarette stark against her red mouth.

He watched as Hermione somewhat awkwardly lit the end with her wand.

"You never smoked much, not even back then," Harry noted, turning to look over the bleak landscape once again.

Hermione simply nodded, standing straight and then leaning against one of the posts on the porch. "I never took a liking to it. It's terribly unhealthy and ruins your teeth. Not to mention it's horrible for children to be around the smoke."

Harry smirked automatically. "Spoken like the daughter of dentists," he teased her, but then he stopped cold. He turned to look at Hermione, alarmed.

"Should you even be smoking," Harry asked, raising a brow.

Hermione shrugged. "Well, I suppose no one should smoke, that's what I was just saying. But, people do..."

"That's not what I meant," said Harry quickly.

"What do you mean, then?"

He glanced pointedly at her stomach.

She met his probing gaze with an expectant look. "You kind of have to answer the question for me to know what you're talking about," she said, taking another short drag.

Harry felt his neck growing warm.

"Well, aren't you...?" he hesitated. "Aren't you...?"

He desperately did not want to say it out loud.

She watched him as though fearing for his sanity.

"Just say it," she finally commanded.

"Well, Ginny and I had thought...maybe you were..."

"What?"

"...Pregnant?" he choked out.

For several seconds Hermione appeared too stunned to respond. She peered into Harry's face as though trying to figure out whether he was serious. Once she determined that he was, her shocked expression slowly turned into a smile before she burst out in laughter.

"Pregnant?" she repeated between breaths as she leaned against the post for support. "Are you mad? What on earth would have made you think I'm pregnant?"

Harry looked down at his feet, feeling the heat rise to his face.

"Ginny had said you were being more emotional than usual..."

"Did she now?" Hermione asked sarcastically. "Well, that's just mad, honestly. I wouldn't dare have another child. Ron and I have enough on our plate with Hugo. Besides, our careers are hardly in a place where we could consider having another child..."

As Harry listened to her, he suddenly felt as though some enormous weight was being lifted slowly off his chest. He felt he could breathe again.

But, he had to be sure.

"What if the kid's unplanned?" Harry suggested, looking at her closely.

"Harry," Hermione said, giving him an expression she usually reserved for oversensitive children, "It'd be nearly impossible for me to get pregnant again. I've Auto-Charmed my wand for the past decade or so. Every morning at eight, my wand reminds me to cast a Contraceptive Charm. I don't think I've missed one in years..."

"Oh," was all Harry could think to say. But then another thought struck him. "But Dr. Peck pulled you aside the other day...after looking at your blood. I had thought it had something to do with you being pregnant?"

At this, Hermione became still. "Oh," she said quietly, "that wasn't about being pregnant."

Harry waited for her to continue, but she did not. Hermione simply looked out onto the backyard, her face coloring slightly.

"Hermione, what was it about? Was it something bad?" he asked, his voice involuntarily rising on the last word despite his attempt to sound reassuring.

"Nothing so bad," she answered unhelpfully.

"Hermione—" Harry began, desperate.

"He just said I'm anemic," she answered, cutting him off. "He was able to tell when he saw my blood sample."

"Anemic?" Harry repeated. "What does that mean?"

Hermione sighed, turning back towards the house. She rubbed her temple as she said, "It means I have a low blood cell count. He said

it's probably caused by the fact that I haven't been eating so well or getting enough sleep. It's lowered my iron intake or something..."

"So, what? It's making you weaker?" he asked, not fully understanding. He had thought Hermione had been looking unwell for several weeks now, but hadn't wished to press her on it. He was ashamed to admit he did not want to dwell on the possibility that Hermione might be pregnant. Now that he knew that she was not, he abruptly found himself excessively consumed with the state of her health.

"He just said I might feel unnaturally weak, tired...get headaches..."

"Have you been feeling all this the past few weeks?" Harry asked, watching her intently.

Hermione nodded, failing to meet his eyes.

"It's just the workload for the trial," she said softly, yet defensively. "It'll all be fine once it's over..."

"Which could take months, Hermione," said Harry exasperated. He grasped her hand. "Why didn't you tell one of us sooner? I know Lakey can't like that you're wearing yourself to the bone like this..."

Hermione was shaking her head. "I know it's important to take care of myself," she said angrily, "but with a case like this you'd be dense to think it wouldn't require some sacrifice from the legal team. Nothing is happening that I didn't anticipate..."

Harry paused, trying to think of the best way to reach her. She could be terribly stubborn when it came to admitting she needed help. He supposed they had that in common.

"But don't you think of the case? What about the Camerons?" he asked her gently. "Do you think you can best represent them when your sleep deprived and weak? That means you won't be able to concentrate. You won't be at your fighting best when you finally take on Bruton and his lackeys."

"I haven't any problem concentrating, Harry," she said coolly.

"You might not notice it. You might want to believe that all this case depends on is the facts...but it also depends on your delivery of those facts. You may not want to acknowledge it now, but you'll need your body to be on your side when you face Callahan. You're going to need all your strength...and we'll help you with that."

Hermione smiled sardonically, as though not really believing him.

She moved her hand inside Harry's, her ring brushing the inside of his palm.

"Who is this 'we' you are talking about," she asked dryly.

"Well," Harry said, "me, Ron, Ginny...all of us. We all want to help you. I seem to remember you telling me once that I shouldn't try to do things on my own. That we're in this together?"

Finally, Hermione broke a genuine smile. "I know that," she said softly. "I've...I've added an iron supplement to my food. It's been helping a little, I think. I suppose I could take a Blood-Replenishing Potion every so often."

Harry rubbed her chilled fingers. "Good. That'll help," he said simply.

The both fell silent for a moment.

"And speaking of help," Hermione said, seeming to rather reluctantly pull her hand from his, "I noticed my gift was on the couch. What did you think?"

"Oh," Harry said, caught off guard. He quickly tried to conceal his disappointment. "It looks interesting..."

Hermione actually giggled. "You look like I gave you a Blast-Ended Skrewt," she said, grinning. "I know it looks rather boring, but I really want you to read it. It would mean a lot to me if you did..."

"To read about wizard-Muggle relations?" Harry questioned doubtfully. "What do I need to know about that?"

Hermione shrugged, looking away. "Just promise me you'll crack it open some time."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "All right. If you say so, love."

"Thank you," she said, giving him a mysterious smile he didn't understand.

She leaned back against the post again and gave him an appraising look as Harry pressed his used cigarette into the railing. She watched as he removed another cigarette from the pack.

"I guess it must be upwards of twelve years now that we've been having these joint Christmases, isn't it?" she mused.

"I was thinking about that earlier tonight actually," Harry replied, smiling. "About the time your mum first brought the angel and all the Weasleys..."

Hermione laughed, remembering. "Yes, they were so confused, weren't they? But I'm happy they've kept it around, you know as a gesture towards my mum..."

Harry nodded.

They were silent for a moment. Hermione wordlessly asked for another cigarette and Harry lit the tip for her. The warm glow of the smoldering tobacco shone like a flare on the dimly lit porch. The sounds of the children playing with their gifts echoed faintly in the distance.

"Harry, tell me about your Christmases before all this," Hermione suddenly requested. "Before Hogwarts, what were your Christmases like?"

Harry took a long drag before answering, directing the smoke away from Hermione.

"It wasn't so bad," he answered honestly. "They would usually go somewhere in Sussex to visit Vernon's mum. If they didn't put me with Mrs. Figg, then I had the house to myself. I could watch TV and eat all I wanted from the refrigerator. I sort of liked it."

"But you were alone though?" Hermione asked, watching him.

Harry shrugged. "That's how I preferred it."

Hermione nodded and looked away, but Harry saw she had the look.

It was the I'll-never-forgive-them-look.

Harry had been on the receiving end of that look for many years now and he couldn't say he particularly enjoyed it. It always gave him the sense that he was missing something. Like there was some massive inside joke that only he didn't know. Some secret realization everyone had except for himself.

If Harry were forced to think on it, he would have to say that the discomfort came from one simple fact. Everyone who gave him the look had had a childhood and he had not.

It was as simple as that.

His earliest memories were of crying alone in his cupboard, acutely afraid of the small noises in the house. Sometimes, he could feel spiders crawling over his skin and he would scream and scream, achingly hoping that his aunt would come find him, comfort him, say one small word that would make him feel as though he was not so desperately alone.

But, she had never come. In those early days, Harry mostly cried himself into exhaustion. When he was older, he learned his tears were not worth the effort. It was best to remain quiet.

At the age of six, he was ordered to cook his first breakfast for Vernon. His uncle had rapped him hard across the skull when the bacon was undercooked. Vernon threatened to fry Harry's own hand on the griddle if he needed to be shown how to do it properly...

One boiling summer afternoon when he was eight, Harry had accidentally put one of Dudley's school ties in the wash. When his Uncle found the ruined scrap of cloth, he had locked Harry in the cupboard. Harry had yelled through the grate that it was far too hot. His uncle had closed the vent and told him to 'shut up.' Harry did, but only because he passed out due to heat exhaustion. He wasn't taken to the hospital until the next day when he kept vomiting up his food, he was so dehydrated.

Theoretically, Harry understood that what he had gone through at the Dursleys could be termed physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Harry would be the first to admit that his treatment there had left scars, scars more permanent than even the lightning-bolt on his forehead...

Yet, he still couldn't look at it that way. He just thought he had a shit childhood. Sure, it had been horrible at the time and even now there were moments when Harry could feel the primal stirring of fear and exclusion within him. But, hadn't his later life more than made up for his childhood? Of course, Voldemort had hunted him until he was seventeen, but he had also experienced success, acceptance, and love in the wizarding world...

Once the Dark Lord had died, his world had suddenly burst open. Until that point, his entire life had been colored with the dark hues of fear, uncertainty, and anger. After, Harry's life became underwritten with new sensations—fun, carelessness, joy. He came to know what it felt like to be loved: by Ginny, by Ron and Hermione, and, eventually, by his new family. One that he could start from scratch without the horrors of his own childhood. Towards his two best friends, his relationships with Ron and Hermione settled into something routine, something not based on the next mishap Harry would inevitably find himself in...

Yet, there was the look...the look that said Harry didn't understand something. Like the horrors of the past were still somehow relevant to his current life. Harry did not want that to be the case, but Hermione's look suggested otherwise.

Harry turned away from Hermione now and returned the cigarette to his lips.

The truth was he was tired of defending the evolution of his life. God knows he had done it on countless occasions. People couldn't understand that he didn't need their pity. Or worse, he didn't need their admiration from coming out of such ignominious circumstances.

He just needed to be.

He had thought Hermione understood that.

"I'm going inside," Harry told her, dropping the cigarette to the ground and crushing it with his heel. "The kids should be getting in bed..."

"Right," Hermione replied, doing the same with her cigarette. "Thanks for the smoke, though I suppose we should never do that again?"

Harry only smiled. He turned towards the door.

"Hey," Hermione called to him, "I know you didn't like my present."

Harry turned to face her. He smiled sheepishly. "It's not that I don't like it."

"I knew you wouldn't like it," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "I'm not an idiot."

"I would never accuse you of that," said Harry, giving her a half-grin.

Hermione smiled. "Well, it could just be the case that a person has more than one thing they want to give a person..."

Harry looked at her strangely. "And what does that mean?"

Hermione smiled at him before she reached down into her coat. She removed a smooth, red leather case.

"It's not much...but I thought you needed a new one," she said, holding it out to him.

Harry took the gift, his heart restarting its frenzied pitch.

Cracking open the lid, he saw a handsome quill lying on a satin cushion.

"It has replenish-able ink," she said eagerly, coming to stand next to him. "You can also charm it to write invisibly and if you see, just there—there's your name inscribed on the wooden part. Harry James Potter. The tip is made from unicorn horn so it never becomes dull."

She looked up as Harry's laughter interrupted her.

"What's—what's so funny?" she asked anxiously. "Do you...do you not like it?"

Harry shook his head, still chuckling.

"It's just that," Harry started, before laughing again. "It's just that I bought you a quill stand..."

"Oh," was all Hermione could say.

Harry closed the lid of the box and quickly embraced Hermione.

"It's great," he told her, holding her tightly. He could smell the smoke in her jacket and somehow it calmed him more than anything that night. "If you put our gifts together, it'd be quite formidable, I reckon."

Hermione was smiling now. "I suppose we think alike."

Harry released her but did not move away. "I've always thought so...you're like the other half of my brain. The half that works better."

"And I've always thought that," said Hermione lightly, squeezing his arm.

They fell back into each other's arms, for a moment lost to everything.

Unreachable.

This, Harry thought suddenly. Why couldn't his Christmases always be like this?

Harry recoiled from the past, resented it because people failed to understand that he wanted the past to have no bearing on his future life. How could the demons be shaken off if he was constantly reminded of their presence? Yet, he found he didn't mind the past so much if Hermione was in it. It somehow didn't hurt.

It was like smoke in a jacket. Faint and comforting, as it should be.

"Happy Christmas, love."

"Happy Christmas, Harry."

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